

THE OLD LAMPLIGHTER

By John F. Hall

When I was 15 years old, I remember walking over the First Street draw bridge located near Miami's city center. This Bascule bridge is 80 years old and crosses over the Miami River. The bridge closed on May 20, 2019, and is being replaced. It is not schedule to reopen until June 2022. I was carrying a red transistor radio and singing along with the popular singing group, The Browns. They were singing, "The Old Lamplighter." The year was 1960, Jim Ed Brown and his sisters Maxine and Bonnie, had a close, smooth harmony characteristic of the Nashville sound. Their music also combined elements of folk and pop. They disbanded in 1967. They were elected to the County Music Hall of Fame in March 2015.

Nat Simon and Charles Tobias wrote the song, "The Old Lamplighter." These are some of their lyrics, "He made the night a little brighter where ever he would go. The old lamplighter from long, long ago. Hi snowy hair was so much whiter beneath the candle glow. The old lamplighter of long, long ago. You'd hear the patter of his feet as he cam toddling down the street. His smile would cheer a lonely heart you see. If there are sweethearts in the park, he'd pass a lamp and keep it dark. Remember the days that use to be, for he recalled when things were new. He loved someone who loved him too, who walks with him alone in memories. Now if you look up in the sky, you'll see the reason why, the little stars at night are all aglow. He turns them on when night is near. He turns them off when dawn is near. The little man we left so long ago. He made the night a little brighter when ever he would go. The old lamplighter from long, long ago."

There is something special about that song. I wondered about the words, "He loved someone who loved him too, who walks with him alone in memories."



One lamplighter told a story about finding a woman late one night. She was asleep and leaning against one of his street lights. She held an infant in her arms. The lamplighter stopped and woke her up. She stood up and told him that her husband left her two days ago and ran off with all their money. The lamplighter was a sympathetic man. he took her home and let her stay until her parents came to get her and the infant.

In 1807, as part of King George III's birthday celebration, the Pall Mall in London, England, became the first place lit by a gaslight. The first gas lamp in America was installed on February 7, 1817 in the city of Baltimore, Maryland. Walter Lindeman spent his adult life as a Baltimore lamplighter. One September 30, 1978, at the age of 78, he was honored at the "Lamplighter's Ball" as the oldest living lamplighter in Baltimore.

The pictures on the previous page show three lamplighters using ladders to light the gas lamps. One picture shows a lamplighter using a long pole to light a gas lamp. In Scotland they called a lamplighter a "Leerie." Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a poem titled, "The Lamplighter." This what he wrote, "My tea is nearly ready and the sun has left the sky; it's time to take the window to see Leerie going by; for every night at teatime and before you take your seat, with lantern and with ladder he comes posting up the street. Now Tom would be a driver and Maria go to sea, and my papa's banker and as rich as he can be; but I, when I am stronger and can choose what I'm to do, oh Leerie, I'll go round at night and light the lamps with you! For we are very lucky, with a lamp before the door, and Leerie stops to light it as he lights so many more; and O! Before you hurry by with ladder and with light, O Leerie, see a little child and nod to him tonight!"

When all the lamps were lit, the lamplighter was finished for the night. He will would have to be up at dawn and with his ladder in hand, he would go to extinguish the 75 lamps he lit the previous night. The gas lamps have .long since disappeared from near our sidewalks. The lamplighters that once made the night a little brighter, are long forgotten memories. In John, Chapter 5, verse 35 are these words, "He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for awhile in His Light."

I had thought about writing a story about the old lamplighter, and I imagined being that person. It would be another role that I wanted to play in this journey of life. Life gets in the way as my son called me on my land line. ATT sends me an advertisement once a week to bundle my landline, my internet and switch to Direct satellite TV. I refuse in spite of the \$300 inducement to switch. I kept my separate landline because during the 2009 ice storm, the cell towers failed, and only the land line worked. I was still drafting this story and I stopped to see what he needed. He said he needed another estimate. He demolished the tornado damaged house in Mount Juliet, Tennessee. Now they wanted him to tear out the floor and the foundation and haul them away. So I drafted another estimate, scanned in a waiver and emailed them to my son.

That afternoon, I was watching Fox News and President Donald Trump was giving a press briefing. He announced that the shutdown would not end at Easter. It would be extended to April 30th. He made the comment that if his administration had not taken any action, the pandemic would kill much more than two million people. Two reporters from CNN, always on the attack, tried to ambush the President. He told them to stop being so snarky. I had gotten out of the attic three large plastic container filled with Easter decorations. We had planned to have the traditional Easter meal and celebrate Andrea's birthday. Now, all of that is on hold.

Bill Lee, the governor of Tennessee, issued a state-wide shelter in place order. Paula and I are over the age of 70 and we both have compromised immune systems. My son, to protect us, leaves what we need on the outside kitchen door steps. What I miss is just being able to see and hug Andrea, Heather, Skyler, Lexie, Jade and Trish. To compensate and to try to make the situation a little brighter, I text them everyday to see how they are doing. I've increased the output of my stories. At least I can put them in my mail box. I raked my small front yard that the high winds caused so many small branches to fall off. I wanted to get on my riding mower before the next rain hits, but it was out of gas. So I'll ask my son to fill my large gas can at Hilltop Cash Market which is less than a half mile up the road. It is the last mom and pop grocery in Trigg County. Ruth and Scott Bridges operate the store. Ruth's husband died 10 years ago. She is almost 80 and she gets up every morning to have the store open by 6:00 AM. The new four-lane highway bypassed the store and only the locals keep it open. Because Paula and I are sequestered, I cannot go there. I almost finished cutting the trees around my old pontoon boat that is stored on blocks. I only have one 40-volt chain saw battery and it does not last long.

The Browns had another very popular song that speaks to most men's lives. I lost my grandfather, John J., in the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic. He died at the age of 44, long before I was born. I don't have a single memory of him. This is one reason why I want Andrea, Heather, John-John, Skyler, Lexie, and Jade to have my stories and to have some memories of this old writer. I will close this story with a song written by Bert Risenfeld and Jean Villard. It is called "Little Jimmie Brown." These are their lyrics: "There's a village hidden deep in valley among the pine trees forlorn. And there on a sunny morning little Jimmy Brown was born. All the chapel bells were ringing in the little valley town. And the song that they were singing was for baby Jimmy Brown. Then the little congregation prayed for guidance from above, "Lead us not into temptation. Bless this hour of meditation. Guide him with eternal love. There's a village hidden deep in the valley beneath the mountains high above. And there, twenty years thereafter Jimmy was to meet his love. All the chapel bells were ringing, 'twas a great day in his life. 'Cause the songs that they were singing was for Jimmy and his wife. Then the little congregation prayed for guidance from above. "Lead us not into temptation bless oh Lord this celebration, may their lives be filled with love." From the village hidden deep in the valley, one rainy morning dark and gray. A soul winged its way to heaven, Jimmy Brown had passed away. Just a lonely bell was ringing in the little valley town. "Twas farewell that it was singing to our good ol' Jimmy Brown. And the little congregation prayed for guidance up above. "Lead us not into temptation may his soul find salvation, of thy eternal love."

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