

## **THE ROOM ON THE SECOND FLOOR**

By John F. Hall

This is the true story about a house in Trigg County, Kentucky that was constructed around 1860 when this nation was fighting the American Civil War. One of the teenage boys living in the house ran away and joined the Confederate Army. He was still 16 when he was wounded in the Battle of Shiloh. That battle was fought over two days from April 6 to April 7 in 1862. It took place in southwestern Tennessee and it was the first major battle to take place in the western theater of war. The Battle of Shiloh became one of the bloodiest engagements of the war, and the level of violence shocked North and South alike. I read the letter that this boy soldier wrote home. In the letter he told his sister that she dare not come visit him in Shiloh. My friend, Tom Vinson owns that letter. Of the 45,000 Confederate soldiers engaged in the battle, there were more than 10,000 casualties.

Houses built in the American South during the 30 years or so before the American Civil War (1861-1865) were called antebellum homes. Antebellum means "before war" in Latin. Antebellum is not a particular house style or architecture. Rather, it is a time and place in history. The house in this story had, at one time, a two story covered porch (portico) with columns. I talked to Tom Vinson's mother, Mrs. Carrie Vinson about the portico that once existed on the old house. She was in her 80's at the time. She recalled that when she was about eight years old, she would walk to the house to play with her friend, Lula Jackson. They would play on the portico. It was still in good condition and she felt safe because the railings were also in good condition. She said the rest of the house was getting run down. The land in front of the house was all grown up in sassafras trees.

In 1919, the house was sold to the Flood family. These were very hard times and the Great Depression was less than a decade away. It was the worse economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world. It lasted from 1929 to 1939. People had poured their savings into stocks. The stock market crash of 1929 made their stocks worthless. They lost everything. The agricultural sector of the economy was struggling due to drought and falling food prices. Banks had an excess of large loans that could not be liquidated. Farmers could not afford to harvest their crops. The Flood family needed more fresh water, so they tore down the portico. They lowered the roof to obtain a steeper pitch. They built a porch on the entire front of the house. They installed a gutter the length of the porch to catch rain water into a freshly dug cistern.

In the 1950s the Flood family sold the farm to Johnny Downs. He made no improvements to the house. He built a new house next to Canton Pike (highway 68/80). He rented out the house to a Calhoun family. They have five daughters. The house had no indoor bathroom. It had one kitchen sink and well water. The house had no carpeting and no insulation in the walls or in the attic. The wood on the front porch, the kitchen porch and the back porch was dry rotted and in need of replacement.

Mrs. Ivy Oakley, a widow, was forced to sell her home and farm in Golden Pond when the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was named to create the Land Between the Lakes. Her son, Andrew Oakley raised cattle on her farm. We were all forced to leave Golden Pond. I removed all the brick from Mr. Oakley's house using a chisel and a three-pound hammer. I salvaged as much barbed wire and row fencing as I could. Mr. Oakley's house was moved by a tractor trailer, put on a barge, moved across the Cumberland River and driven to the farm and put on a foundation next to the old farm house. Mrs. Oakley purchased the old house and farm from Johnny Downs in 1964. She was given some time to move out of Golden Pond by the TVA.

Before Paula and I were married, we went to visit the old Farm house It was vacant. I took Paula's picture standing next to a wooden post on the front porch. In that picture one can see the poor condition of the wood on the front porch. Inside the dilapidated house, the staircase still retained its charm. The wallpaper in the foyer was starting to peel off. One could see the holes in the plaster. Rain had seeped through one of the single panes on the window on the first landing. Some of the window's putty had broken off and allowed the wind to blow in the rain. There was a single light fixture in the foyer. We walked up the stairs. It amazed me that five girls had slept in the two second floor unfinished rooms. There was no bathroom in the house, just the outhouse behind the house.

Mrs. Ivy Oakley contracted to have two first floor rooms in the house renovated. The kitchen and the living room walls were covered over with sheets of wood paneling. A drop ceiling was installed in the living room. A small bathroom was made in the kitchen pantry. The rotted wood on the front porch was removed and a concrete porch poured. No insulation was put in the walls. Aluminum siding was used to cover over most of the old wood siding, A large electrical breaker box was installed to handle three electric heaters. The rest of the house remained untouched. Mrs. Oakley lived alone. She would sit in a wooden rocking chair on the front porch and watch the comings and goings on the road leading to the house.

Time marched on and Mrs. Ivy Oakley died in 1978. The house remained vacant for two years. Paula's parents sold us one acre on the farm. I intended to build a new house on that acre. Paula's dad offered to allow us to live in the old house and to reimburse us for any repairs that we made to the old house. He had raised tobacco and cattle most of his farming years. When the cattle market went south, he decided to switch to row cropping. Disaster hit when a three-year drought crippled the crops. I was share cropping one acre of burley tobacco and using the stock barn next to the old house to cure it. Paula's dad got seriously behind in his farm mortgage payments. After being delinquent for two years, in 1985 the Farm Credit manager told him that he needed to sell his farm equipment to pay the past due mortgage payments. I heard a rumor that the former owner's son wanted to get the farm back. It was not anything that I could prove. I suspected that the Farm Credit manager wanted to put Mr. Oakley out of the farming business. This would happen when Mr. Oakley sold all of his farming equipment. Mr. Oakley offered to sell some of the farm acreage to pay for the delinquent mortgage payments. The Farm Credit manager refused to release part of the mortgage lien to allow this to happen. I was ready to give up raising tobacco. I was still working full time as a State Trooper. The Army was having

me on active duty at least 100 days a year. I was burning both ends of the proverbial stick. But I took a dim view of the Farm Credit manager taking advantage of Mr. Oakley when he was down on his luck.

There is a place in the Bible, 1 Timothy 5:8 with these words, "And whoever does not provide for relatives and especially family members has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." In 1965, the Kentucky Farm Bureau Insurance Company would only value the old farm house for \$5,000. Mr. Oakley was \$10,000 delinquent in mortgage payments. I called the Farm Credit manager and told him that he was getting into my farming business. I proposed, since he would not allow the sale of any of Mr. Oakley's farm acreage, to allow me to exchange my one acre of land for one acre of land that included the old farm house, since I was living in that house. I would pay Farm Credit \$15,000. This would make Mr. Oakley current on his farm payments. The Farm Credit manager agreed to my proposal. Years later, I felt sorry for this Farm Credit manager. His adopted son murdered the manager and the manager's wife.

So here Paula and I stood, the owners of a dilapidated farm house. The mortar between the bricks in the three chimneys had turned to sand. The previous renters had burned coal to heat the house. The chimneys were a fire hazard. There was no insulation in the walls. So room by room, Paula and I began to gut the walls downstairs. The drop ceiling in the living room was a problem so we tore it down. As it fell, a mummified cat fell out of the ceiling and really scared Paula. The plaster used in the walls was a mixture of lime, water and sand with horse hair used as a binder. We were able to use regular drywall compound to fill the plaster holes. Over 100 sheets of drywall were installed in the house. We hired help to install the drywall in the foyer ceiling. In places not accessible on the landings, the ceiling was over 26 feet from the ground floor. I did the electrical and put in a half bath on the second floor. Back in the 1860s, there was a narrow, long staircase leading to the girl's room. It was located in the living room. There was no door on the second floor landing leading to the girls room. This provided the women in the house privacy.

After decades of renovation, the house became the "old home place" where my grandchildren spent their summers and celebrated their birthdays. The former kitchen, where they once made sausage, became a formal dining room. We contracted to have a modern kitchen addition attached to the house. The kitchen porch was removed to allow this construction. Except for the kitchen and the downstairs bathroom, the rooms and staircase are carpeted. The walls are covered with the kids pictures. The grand mantel from Mrs. Ivy Oakley home in Golden Pond is the center piece in the master downstairs bedroom. The old house has no central system. It has six window air conditioners. Each room has its own built in electric heater. The aluminum siding, after 55 years, needs to be pressure cleaned and painted. Trim on the front porch needs to be replaced. The new covered deck on the side of the house needs to be finished. It is a never ending task to keep up the maintenance on the 3,000 square feet of living space.

I have been writing stories in this old farm house for the past 40 years. My favorite novel writers are F Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Fitzgerald died when he was 44 of a heart attack. Hemingway died at age 61 of a self inflicted gun shot wound. He is

perhaps the best and most famous of the two. Hemingway wrote his world famous novel, *A Farewell To Arms*, on the second floor in his 1851 house in Key West, Florida. Like my old house in the 1860s, Hemingway's house had to capture rain water into a cistern. There is no fresh ground water in Key West. Hemingway's novel is based on his World War I experience as an ambulance driver during the Italian Campaigns. He was wounded and fell in love with the nurse that helped him recover from his wounds. She did not share the same feelings towards him. Later in life, Hemingway survived two plane crashes, over ten concussions and several car crashes. It may have been too many shock treatments at the Mayo Clinic that might have contributed to his depression and his demise.

All of us should have an obligation to our Good Lord to persevere in this life until we die a natural death. Life is short enough as it is. We should allow Christ's hand and not our hand to end our life. We have an obligation to those that we love and to those who love us, to fearlessly face the trials and tribulations of this life. One of my favorite hymns is *Let There Be Peace On Earth*. The song was written by Jill Jackson and Sy Miller. Some of their lyrics are: "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me. Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be. With God as our Father, brothers all are we. Let me walk with my brother in perfect harmony. Let peace begin with me, let this be the moment now. With every step I take let this be my solemn vow. To take each moment and live each moment, in peace eternally. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." Go to YouTube and listen to Vince Gill, Amy Grant, Michael McDonald and others sing *Let There Be Peace On Earth*. It may inspire you.

Like Hemingway, I write my stories mainly on the second floor room of my old farm house. He called his room his writing studio. He had a small desk with a manual typewriter. My writing studio is in the room that Paula and I decorated for our granddaughters, Andrea and Heather. It has a simple card table with a folding chair. On the table one can find two Dell laptops. The larger laptop has a separate keyboard and mouse. I write most of my stories on this laptop. The smaller laptop is used to help my son in his work. I acknowledge that Christ is the force behind the talent of my words. To Christ I give the honor and the glory. Most of my family and friends know that I write for the sheer enjoyment of writing. Writing became my favorite pastime. If I can inspire, or motivate, or help, or entertain just one person, then my writing has served a purpose. The one thing that impressed me when Paula and I first walked into the vacant house in 1964 was the staircase. We put up a crystal chandelier in the foyer. We had a large, full length portrait taken some 30 years ago. We put it in the foyer where Andrea and Heather would practice on the piano. We never expected to own the house or to spend the majority of our marriage life, living in the old farm house. When my oldest granddaughter, Andrea was about four years old, we would sit on a double seat, wooden rocking chair on the front porch. I would whistle at the birds sitting on the branches high up in the large maple trees. The birds would sing back. Andrea believed the birds were talking to us. Such are the memories that I recall when I climb the steps leading to the room on the second floor, to work on another story.

John F. Hall

\*Read more stories written by John F. Hall at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>