

THE FORMAL INVITATION

By John F. Hall

I have written many stories about my old farm house on Dyers Hill Road. In this story, I write about having an Open House there 40 years ago. It had nothing to do with selling the house. At that time, I was renting the house for \$1.00 a year and any improvements that I made, my father-in-law would reimburse me. The Open House was a social event to honor my wife, Paula. We had been married for 15 years at that time. I invited the people that once lived in that house and a few close friends. I had formal invitations printed and mailed. The story's focus is on the only invitation that was hand delivered to Rufus Dyer Jr. He is the grandson of John J. Dyer Jr., the man that built the house in 1861. For the first time, I write about a concrete block building that is located about 25 feet from my carport. This story is best told with pictures to enhance the theme. In this age of the pandemic, my writing studio on the second floor has also become my sanctuary.



This story begins with a description of the concrete block building that I call the “well house.” Inside this building is a five feet by five feet section that is four feet below the concrete floor. Inside this section is a 20-gallon water tank. Water is pumped into this tank through a submersion pump that is 125 feet below the ground. The well has a six-inch steel casing. I built a wooden floor covering over the 5' by 5' section. The well supplied water to my house, Paula's parent's house, and Paula's sister's house. All the houses are now on the Barkley Lake county water system. I kept the submersion pump operational for additional fire protection. The East Golden Pond Fire Station 15 two tenths of a mile from the well house.

In 1946, Johnny Downs purchased the farm and the house from Henry Flood. His son,



Burwick helped him farm the land. They built the well house. Burwick married Nida Ford on April 24, 1943. She never used her first name and she wanted everyone to call here Merle. They decided to make the well house their home, rather than live in the old farm house with Burwick's parents. The well house measures 15 feet by 19 feet. It has a solid wood front door and two side windows. At one time it had a small chimney that

began in the ceiling rafters and extended through the roof. It had a potbellied stove for heat and two ceiling lights. There is a concrete pad at the front door that measures five feet by seven feet and has a small porch covering. When Burwick was pouring this pad, and the cement was still wet, he scratched in the concrete: “Merle F. Downs April 23, 1947.” Below her name he scratched: “Burwick.” It is a little hard to see in the picture with this story, but they each put one hand in the wet cement to make a palm print. I

mention this because my grandchildren, Andrea, Heather, and John-John put both of their hands, in wet cement. in a small section of a sidewalk behind the house that I was repairing. They just put one initial: "A. H. and J" above their palm prints.



I mentioned in a previous story, that my wife, Paula, my son John and I moved into the old farm house during a snow storm in 1978. I was providing law enforcement security during a coal strike in Hopkins County. I was given just two days off to make the move. It was my intent to live in the old house until I could build a new house down the road.

Like the previous owners of the old farm house, farming was a risk they accepted. From 1982 until 1985, a drought ravaged the tobacco crop and cattle prices fell. My father-in-law was unable to make the farm mortgage payments three years in a row. I had purchased an acre of land on the farm before the drought hit. Farm Credit wanted my father-in-law to sell his farm equipment to make the past due mortgage payments. Selling his farm equipment would put him out of the farming business and foreclosure was Farm Credit's next step. They would not allow my father-in-law to sell off any land to make the mortgage payments. I came up with a proposal to exchange my one acre for one acre with the house and pay Farm Credit directly to make my father-in-law current with his mortgage payment.



Continuing with the story, two years after moving into the old farm house, on my 35th birthday in 1980, my son and I decided to have the Open House. I had formal invitations printed and mailed with RSVP that no gifts are requested. One invitation RSVP came back from a descendant of Kate and Pete Jackson who lived in Hopkinsville. The Jackson's purchased the house from the Dyers. This person sent her regrets, but mentioned that the Jackson's would be having a family reunion later and asked if they could visit at that time. Paula and I agreed and we welcomed a large group of Jackson's several years after the Open House.

(Pictured: Rufus Dyer, son of John Dyer Jr. (photo 1895) lived in Dyer House 18 years).

When I was mailing out the formal invitations, I was told that one of John J. Dyer Jr.'s descendants was living north of Cadiz. I felt that I needed to hand deliver his invitation. I drove out to his small house. He is Rufus Dyer's son and he was in his 80s and a widower. He welcomed me inside his home. It was sparsely furnished. I handed him the invitation to come to the Open House. I told him that I would drive him if he needed a ride. I did not see a vehicle when I first drove up to his house. He said that he had

someone who could take him. He walked over to a small table and picked up a picture. It was not in a frame. If my memory serves me right, I believe that it was in between pages in a book, perhaps it was a Bible. He handed me the picture and said: "These are my parents and the picture was taken in 1895." I stood there and studied the picture for a few minutes. When I started to hand the picture back to him, he surprised me.

He said, "We lived in that house for 18 wonderful years. I want you to have the picture." A feeling of sadness came over me taking that picture of his parents. This was a man of humble means, living alone, with no family pictures on the walls. I studied his face that



was weathered and wrinkled from years of exposure to the sun. I think that he wanted people to know about his mother and father and the fact that his grandfather, yer Jr., built the house that Paula, my son and I were living in. I thanked him for the picture and told him that I was looking forward to seeing him at the Open House. This man named Rufus, like many people that I know, did not want to be forgotten after they died. He had no way of knowing that 40 years after our first meeting, that I would be writing this story. He did not know that I would be using the picture of his parents in this story.

I thank Rufus for the picture of his parents. For some reason, in a departure from what I usually do, I wrote his name on the front of the picture; the fact that he was the son of John J. Dyer Jr.; the year of the picture, and the fact that he lived in the Dyer house for 18 years. I guess that I was dumb founded that he gave me the picture and I forgot to ask his wife's name.

The day of the Open House came. We had plenty of lemonade, cake and cookies for the guests. The turn out was better than I expected. The Floods, the Downs, the Calhoun's, the Vinson's and so many others came. But the highlight of the social event was when Rufus Dyer Jr., came and knocked on the front door. Paula and I greeted him and we



showed him all the work that Paula and I did in the old house. After showing Rufus the entire house, we came back to the foyer. Paula left to be with the other guests. I watched as Rufus looked intently at the staircase. Then his eyes began to tear up and tear drops began to roll down his face. This was his childhood home. I was bringing back memories of the times when he would run up and down those steps. His parents were gone, as was his

wife. But a smile came on his face. He thanked me for inviting him to the Open House. He said that he had many happy memories living in the old house. He looked tired and the emotions of the evening, only he could appreciate. The friend that drove him to the Open House was waiting to take him home. I bid him a farewell and watched as he

walked away. He was the direct link to the man that built my old house. I never saw Rufus again. I heard that he died a short time later.

I went into the east room to speak to the other guests. We called it the game room. There



was a full size pool table in that room. I explained that I was only half owner of the pool table. The other half belonged to my father-in-law. My son and his first cousin, Dale Garner, who lived next to us, loved to play pool in that room. I installed thick paneling on the walls. I saved the fire place mantle from Paula's grandmother's house in Golden Pond and put it over the fireplace in that room. When Dale died in a car accident, with six other students, he was just 16. I gave the pool table to my other nephew, Barry Oakley. Paula's grandmother purchased the farm in 1965. She lived in two rooms in the old farm house until she died in 1977 at the age of 90.

One of the Flood descendants told me that his aunt died in her sleep in that room. As we walked into the kitchen, he got a big smile on his face and said they called that room the “hog room” because they would cut up the hogs and make sausage there. He went on to say that Henry Flood removed the portico on the front of the house and built the long front porch because they needed to obtain more rain water. At one time there was a cistern at the front porch and one at the kitchen porch. In the early 1960s, Roscoe and Thelma Calhoun rented the old farm house from Johnny Downs. They have five daughters: Virginia, Stella, Margaret, Wanda, and Bobbi. The old farm house at that time was heated by coal. There was a fireplace in the two big rooms on the first floor and one in the kitchen. The two upstairs bedrooms had potbellied stoves connected by flues to the chimneys. The well provided water to the kitchen sink only. The water was heated in the kitchen fireplace. The house did not have a water heater.

The girls and their parents used a pitcher, a washbasin, and a washcloth to bathe. Hair washing was rarely done. They cleaned their hair by brushing to get rid of the dirt and oil. Then they washed the hair brush. They moved before a bathroom was installed in 1965. The toilet was in the outhouse. The house had no insulation, no carpeting, and no air conditioning. The living conditions in the house had not changed, except for single lights in each room, from 1860 to 1964.

One of my surrogate granddaughters, Lexie Crisp, wrote: “I'm sure you thought of another great story to write!” A great story usually has a minimum of five elements. This short story is about Paula's grandmother, Iva Oakley, and it only has three elements. Miss Iva would sit in a rocking chair on the front porch and look down the road to watch the vehicles traveling on Highway 68. She always kept a tobacco stick handy to chase away the cats that were bad about getting between her feet and scratching her legs. One time Miss Iva was walking in the front yard checking on her flowers. She might have disturbed A big, black, rat snake and it wrapped around her leg. This snake is not

venomous and it strangles its prey. Miss Iva screamed! I was nearby and I ran over, pulled the snake off her leg and killed it. She thought that I saved her life. Now I'm the one sitting on the front porch drafting stories on my Iphone 6. The coyotes have killed all the cats. One of my brother-in-law's roosters comes by my bedroom window every morning around 5:00 AM and crows. To add insult to injury, this same rooster comes back around 7:00 AM and crows again. At night, the rooster flies up into a tree to protect itself from "Willey" coyote who is always hungry for a chicken dinner.

The theme of this story is best expressed in the lyrics found in the song "The Invitation." These are some of the lyrics written by David Ware, Matt Crocker, and John David: "Fill this house with Your Spirit. Mark these walls with Your Peace. As we gather two or three, fill our hearts with Your Spirit. Mark our lives with Your Love. As we worship we will see Your kingdom here. Purify us in Your Presence. Steel our hearts with Your Grace. In communion we believe You're working here. You are faithful to deliver. Lord Your Love has made a way. Everyday I see Your blessings. And everyday I'll sing Your praise. Let Your healing be my portion. Let Your mercy be my strength. Be my refuge and my strength. Be my rest, my hiding place. God my rock and my salvation. My redemption and my grace. Let Your Presence go before me. Let Your Spirit lead the way. May Your kingdom come in power as Your church begins to praise. Every tongue confessing Jesus Holy name. Come, come, come, we are desperate for You, Lord. In my sanctuary room I can invite in the Holy Spirit and meet with God. I'm distanced from my church family, some of my family and most of my friends. But I am not disconnected from Christ's presence and His love. Christ needs no Formal Invitation to come into my home.

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*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:

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