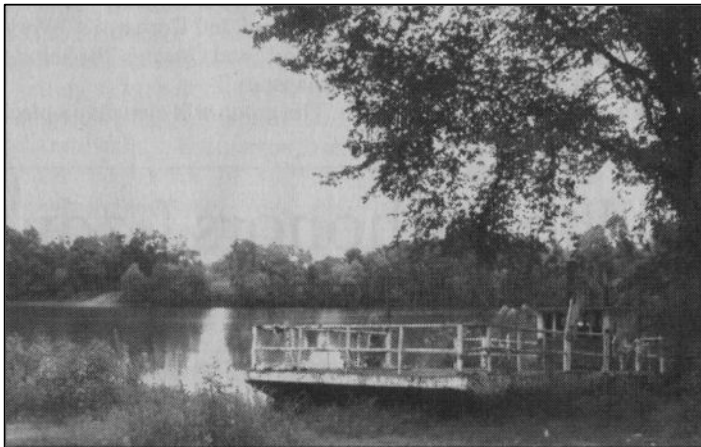


CROSSING THE CUMBERLAND ON THE JERE MITCHELL

By Robert Rodgers "Bob" Chaffin
Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN
Sunday, 11 November 2012, pg. C5

When there was little else to do, and gas was 25-cents per gallon, our family, like many of yours, went for rides when we had leisure time. In fact, Jan and I still like to get in the car and just cruise around to places we don't often get to visit.



Much of the time there would be family somewhere on the route and we would stop while Mama and Daddy visited for what seemed like an interminable length of time. It was probably much shorter than it seemed to Donnieta and me, but our limited attention spans created their own perceptions. Occasionally

however, there was not a destination, it was just a ride. I like those best of all, because we went to places like Bug Tussle, Wartrace, Hardscrabble, Step Rock Hill, or the Bloody Eighth District; we went around Devil's Elbow, passed through Difficult and Defeated and rolled on to Nameless and just cruised around in general.



Occasionally we would ride down to Rome, cross the Dr. James Fisher Bridge, and take the Jere Mitchell across the Cumberland to Beasley's bend. Then we would work our way out to Dixon Springs, and stop for a Co-cola at Taylor's Store in downtown Dixon Springs. Crossing the ferry was

pretty exciting and the Jere Mitchell was big and modern by the standards of the day. Even after the brown eyed girl and I married, there were several places on the route to Detroit where we had to cross a ferry, if we "went through the mountains." By going

through the mountains, I mean going north from Cookeville to Livingston, through Byrdstown, into Albany, KY, then north through Somerset and on to Renfro Valley (the little town that launched the careers of Red Foley and Homer and Old Jethro). The mountain route took you down into the river gulch east of the Dale Hollow Dam, across the Cumberland, and up a switchback road chiseled into the hillside. Depending on the road one followed, there might be one or two ferry crossings. In one the boat was shackled to a cable that stretched across the river and a rigging of cables and pulleys used the river current to provide power coming and going.

At the other, the ferry barge was shunted across the river by an open johnboat and an outboard, affixed to the barge platform. There was no cable so a degree of skill was required by the ferryman. Obviously the cable arrangement would only work on rivers small enough that no traffic up and down the river would be hindered by the cables.

The Jere Mitchell, the last of the Rome ferryboats, was a sure enough ferryboat however, and still sits forlornly drawn up on the bank beneath the Fisher Bridge just east of Rome. It can be easily seen by pulling down into the area provided by the Corps of Engineers for launching pleasure boats at Round Lick Creek at the head of Old Hickory Lake. There is talk of restoration and of reactivating the boat, which would probably be a real treat and an oddity that would attract attention today, but a captain with a river pilot's license is required for operation, is my understanding, and finding one that wishes to spend his time at the Rome Ferry is quite difficult.

The Rome Ferry was at first a much cruder affair, as can be seen by the picture, but this more elaborate boat was named after Jere Mitchell, a Smith County native killed in World War II, and was one of the last two ferries remaining in operation on the Cumberland. It was privately owned by Comer Haley of Beasley's Bend, who provided the ferry and its landings to the county in the late 1920s for one dollar, and was to operate until a bridge was built at this location, according to an agreement with county officials. The old ferry was placed on the National Register of Historic Sites in 1987, and is at River Mile 292.4. I don't know when it was last in operation so if you do please let me know.

Our excursion was completed when we wound out way back up Highway 25, past Cox Davis School, past the old Tanglewood Road (a favorite parking spot for teenagers – or so I heard tell) and past the Bloody Bucker. (The Bloody Bucket was what was locally referred to as a knife and gun club- they checked you at the door and if you didn't have one or the other, they gave one to you.) Passing back through Beulah Land, we made a left at Jefferson Ave., and were home again. It was now time to quickly eat Sunday dinner leftovers, which had been left on the table with a cloth spread over them, and then back to church. Our Sunday rides were a microcosm of our lives themselves, starting out down a road of choice, then winding our way through both expected and unexpected circumstances, familiar and unfamiliar territory, sometimes meeting or making friends along the way, occasionally encountering a detour, and often making difficult, if not outright dangerous, crossings. Eventually, we would arrive back home, ready to meet again with God's people.

Enjoy the journey, endure the crossings with care, enlist the help of others when the detours come, and always keep the final destination in mind.

Have a blessed day.

*Read more of Robert Rodgers "Bob" Chaffin stories at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>