

## **THE END OF A PARISH, THE FALL OF A TOWN**

By John F. Hall

In the Land Between the Lakes (LBL) National Recreation Area, in the former site of the town of Golden Pond, one can find two, side by side, Kentucky Historical Markers. They are located in a paved parking area, just off the westbound lanes of US Highway 68 & KY 80. The name of the first Marker is Golden Pond. The name of the second Marker is



St. Joseph Parish. It is only because of the intervention of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, that I was responsible for obtaining the Golden Pond Historical Marker. This is such an amassing story of how a teenage soldier, from Florida, who fell in love with a teenage girl in Golden Pond, named Paula Andree Oakley, and would go on and battle the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) to obtain a historical marker for Golden Pond. I have written stories about this before.

When I would share my story in public, I felt that people, who were listening, thought I was just telling a tall tale. My sincere hope is that, Christ, Who made it possible for me to obtain the Marker, will be given the honor and the glory. In Matthew, Chapter 10, Verse 33, are these words: “But whoever disowns me - before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.”

In 1969, I was studying in the library on Murray State University. It was a Monday morning. Apparently, another student had opened the Sunday edition of the Louisville Courier Journal newspaper, and spread it out over the wide study table, next to where I was sitting. The students are requested to put the newspaper back together, and put it back in the newspaper rack. I guess that the student was running late for class and did not have time to put the paper back together again. I did not want the librarian to walk by, and think that I made a mess of that newspaper. So I stop studying, and I walked over to the table, and began putting the newspaper back together. As I was doing this, I noticed that a journalist had written a long article called, “The Rise and Fall of Golden Pond.” It was A plus research. It had historical dates about the founding of the town, and dates when the town was twice destroyed by fire. It had an aerial photograph of the buildings in the town, before they were demolished by Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). I could see the house that belonged to Paula’s parents, Andrew and Pauline Oakley. Paula, the former Paula Andree Oakley, and I, lived in that house, with Paula’s parents for two years, after we were married on Fort Campbell, April 17, 1965. More importantly, the newspaper journalist, referenced documents and sources to support his article. I made notes of that information. On the drive back to Trigg County, I decided to call George Bleidt, the last Post Master of Golden Pond. I called George and told him that we should try to get a Kentucky Historical Marker for Golden Pond.

George Bleidt, who I thought should have been made the mayor of Golden Pond, said to me, in his usual, country, calm voice: “Now, John, you would be wasting your time. I fought the TVA and I lost.” I detected a sadness in his voice. His love for Golden Pond and her people, was very dear to him. I was just a former soldier, who fell in love with a girl and her town. I was a stranger, no one knew me. My name had no identity. I was known as Andrew Oakley’s son-in-law. So, I was accepted, as one of the “Between The

Rivers” people. But Golden Pond became my town, and it was worth fighting for. The TVA made Paula and me leave. Then it destroyed every remnant of the heritage of the people that once lived there.

I told George Bleidt that I needed to at least try. So I called the TVA Land Between the Lakes Headquarters. I made an appointment to speak to the TVA LBL Director. I went into his office. He was friendly at first. Then I asked if he would help me obtain a Kentucky Historical Marker for the town of Golden Pond. His disposition rapidly changed, and his face got red. I thought he might jump out of his chair. He shouted: “No! No! That is the name of our Headquarters.” I thanked him for his time. I walked out of his office, and I drove to the former site of Golden Pond. There is a wide three-lane pull off in the center of that former town. Paula and I would wait for the Greyhound bus there, that would take me back to Fort Campbell, when we were dating. Funny, how people become involved in your life. I would mail letters to Paula. She would check on the mail at Post Office Box 56. George Bleidt would come to the Post Office, on Sunday afternoon, to sort the mail that came in that weekend. He would look out the Post Office window, as Paula and I waited for the bus, in her dad’s car. When Paula checked for the mail that week, George would say: “I saw you two spooning, waiting for the bus.”

I’ve never been forced out of a town, before. Maybe that is why I was trying so hard not to let the memory of that town die, such a vicious death. I guess I was a hopeless romantic, as expressed in a 1960 song written by Johnny Horton called, “All For The Love of a Girl.” These are some of his lyrics: “Well, today I’m so weary. Today I’m so blue, sad and broken hearted and it’s all because of you. Life was so sweet dear. Life was a song. Now you’ve gone and left me, oh, where do I belong? And it’s all for the love of a dear little girl. All for the love that sets your heart in a whirl. I’m a man who’d give his life, and the joys of this world, all for the love of a girl...”.

In Matthew, Chapter 7, Verse 7, are these words: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” I pulled into the wide pull off area in the former site of Golden Pond, and parked near the flower garden. There is a shade tree in that garden. I sat on the hood of my Chevy II There was no traffic on the two-lane highway 68/80, coming in either direction. Other than the sound of a bird, nesting in the shade tree in the flower garden, there was only the sound of silence. Sitting there, I realized that George Bleidt was right. I went on a fool’s mission. Feeling sorry for myself, I lowered my head and prayed: “Please Jesus! Help me.” I didn’t even know what I wanted Christ to do.

Five minutes went by, and I heard a truck gearing down on a hill on the west side of town. It was a dump truck with two highway workers. The truck pulled in between me and the flower garden. The two workers got out with their lunch buckets. They walked over and sat under the shade tree, in the flower garden, and began eating their lunch. I don’t know how to best explain what happened next.

Something made me get off the hood of my car. It had me walk over to the two workers eating their lunch. It had me ask them a question. I asked them: “Is the flower garden on

state highway right-of way?” They both answered: “Yes it is!” The question and their answer made no sense to me. I assumed that when the TVA was deeded all the land in the Land Between the Lakes, that it included highway 68/80 and its right-of-way. So I began to research, and I discovered that the Commonwealth of Kentucky never deeded highway 68/80, or its right of way to the TVA, Kentucky remained the owner and responsible for the maintenance of that highway. To this day, I cannot explain what prompted me to walk over to the two workers and ask a question, that came out of nowhere.

This former resident of Golden Pond, that the LBL Director, may have thought was just a stupid Murray State college kid, was about to show some wildcat grit. I called George Bleidt and told him that I found a way to get around the TVA. I called the Kentucky Historical Society in Frankfort, Kentucky. I talked to a person in the Historical Marker Section. I requested a Historical Marker for Golden Pond. I was told to contact Roy McDonald and request an application from him. He was their representative for the Marker program in Trigg County. Roy told me to work with George Bleidt on the wording for the Marker. I called George and told him that I needed to come to his house. I think that George was surprised that I was able to best the TVA. We sat down at his kitchen table. George looked me in the eye, and said, in his usual, country, calm voice: “Now, John, I have one request. I ask that you not use the word moonshine on the Marker. Most of the Christian people living in Golden Pond, were not involved in that commerce.” I assured George that I would not use that word on the historical marker.

This is the wording that George and I had agreed on: “GOLDEN POND. A town from 1892-1969. Named for a nearby pond that gives a golden reflection from the sunrays. It was originally two settlements, Fungo and Golden Pond, later becoming one. Twice destroyed by fire and rebuilt, 1898 and 1936. The town prospered from abundant natural resources, in the area, the rich valley soils, the timbered hills, cool springs, iron ore, wild life.”



I asked George to select the speakers for the dedication unveiling of the Golden Pond Historical Marker. I borrowed my father-in-laws, green Ford pick up truck. I put a full size American flag on the side of the truck. I made a speaker podium out of a two by two inch post, on which I attached a two-foot by two-foot flat half inch board. I anchored it to the side hole of the truck bed. I brought four folding chairs for the speakers to sit in the bed of the truck. I told George that my wife, Paula, and I would give the town a proper burial. I constructed a miniature wooden coffin. At the end of the speeches, I had Paula hold the coffin in which I place a miniature noose. I then buried the coffin at the base of the Marker. The Cadiz Record newspaper sent a reporter. It was estimated that over 200 people came to witness the unveiling.

In 1972, Two years after the dedication of the Golden Pond Historical Marker, I joined the Kentucky State Police. I was assigned to Trigg County in 1978. I received a dispatch about vandalism to the Catholic cemetery, south of Golden Pond. The TV patrol officers

discovered the vandalism. I drove my police car to a small cemetery sign on the side of the road. There was no access road, that lead up a steep hill to the cemetery. I had to walk up to the cemetery. As I was walking up the hill, a reporter from the Cadiz Record newspaper, drove up and parked behind my car. The reporter, Janet Freedman, called out: "Wait up for me! I want to get some pictures for the paper." I guess they had a police scanner in their office and heard the dispatch. We walked to the cemetery. All the tombstones were knocked down. Janet photographed the damage. I knelt down to pick up a small 5" by 7" temporary grave marker. It belonged to an infant girl who had recently died. The glass on the marker was smashed. It protected a card on the metal. Janet took my picture as I was looking at the desecrated marker. We straitened the knocked over tombstones. I thanked Janet for her help. She made a front page report of the damage to the cemetery, and she used my picture holding the temporary marker.

In 1981, I was one of the first members to establish the Trigg County Historical and Preservation Society. In 1983, the Society decided to write a Trigg County History, The Past 100 Years, 1885 to 1985. Tom Vinson was lead chairman for the book. He appointed me to be the Society's Historian. In the churches section of the book, they needed some one to write a history, about the Saint Joseph Catholic Church, that once existed south of Golden Pond. Tom Vinson asked me to do the research, as the church was razed back in 1924 I told Tom that I would do the best that I could, to uncover the history of that church. I titled my research, "Three Churches of Saint Joseph." This is what I wrote: "Little has been written by historians about the mission parish of Saint Joseph that thrived near Golden Pond during the years 1876 until 1925."

"Gathering dust on the shelf of the Louisville Diocesan Archives were documents that told of events of the Golden Pond Mission which had not been revealed before. Thanks to the assistance of Father John A. Lyons of Louisville, this history is presented. The small mission parish of Saint Joseph was established in 1878 by a group of German Catholic settlers, who traveled from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to operate and work at Laura Furnace located five miles south of Golden Pond, Kentucky. From its establishment in 1878 and until 1882, the church had no church building. The missionary priest came on horseback from Hopkinsville, crossed the Cumberland River by ferry boat, and rode on to the settlement several times a month. Services were held in the homes of the settlers."

"The priest was a welcome guest, and it was not unusual for the priest to sit at table with the host family, to have all join hands and pray the blessing for the meal together. In 1882 the first church building for the mission parish of Saint Joseph was erected out of logs and built on a site several miles south of Golden Pond, near the Lick Creek Road. The log church was small and had a dirt floor. It was in this crude log church that the first large confirmation of Catholics occurred in Trigg County. The Louisville Diocesan newspaper contained the following report on November 7, 1887: "On Tuesday the 25" of October the Rt. Rev. Bishop William George McCloskey of Louisville, assisted by Rev. Michael Melody of Hopkinsville, confirmed 23 persons of the German settlement, situated between the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers in Trigg County. It was a source of great pleasure to witness the piety and faith of the people as manifested in the occasion."

“The Catholic Bishop was moved by the faith of the German settlers and he prevailed upon the generosity of Sir Sylvester Johnson, a benefactor of the Catholic Church from New Haven, Nelson County, Kentucky, to donate funds for a new church at Golden Pond in 1888. Sir Johnson donated \$752 to erect a frame church building. Father Michael Melody was in charge of the project. The Louisville Diocesan newspaper contained the following report on November 17, 1888: “Thanks to the princely generosity of Sir Sylvester Johnson, the Germans living in Trigg County hope to finish their new church by the first of December. The Philanthropy of Sir Johnson helped the German settlers for a period of one year. Disaster struck the little congregation in the early spring of 1890. A storm totally destroyed the new church building.”

“The destruction was reported to the Louisville Diocesan newspaper on April 12, 1890: “At the German settlement in Trigg County, a tornado made a clean sweep of the church and everything in it. The loss of their church was all the harder to bear as it was built last year.” In 1891, Father Michael Melody was transferred from Hopkinsville, and the missionary parish of Saint Joseph was transferred to Paducah.”

“It came under the care of Father Henry Jansen, Pastor of Saint Francis de Sales Church of Paducah, Kentucky. Father Jansen’s extensive mission, according to the Catholic Directory of 1890, embraced Crittenden, Livingston, Lyon, McCracken, and Trigg County. A newly ordained priest, Father Charles Auer, was assigned to assist Father Jansen. In 1893 the third church building for the mission parish of Saint Joseph was erected under the direction of Father Auer. The iron ore was playing out in the Land Between The Rivers parish. Progress in the steel industry made the Laura Furnace obsolete. The Catholic settlers watched the fires of Laura Furnace turn cold and die for the last time. The younger generation of Catholics migrated to the larger cities to find work. The Saint Joseph Catholic Church fell into disuse and it was razed in 1925. The only remnant of the of the settlement is in the parish cemetery, which is located several miles south of Golden Pond, approximately 800 feet up a hill near Lick Creek Road. Unfortunately, the historical cemetery is not accessible to the public road. Forgotten and unmarked, the only Catholic cemetery came to the attention of the Kentucky Historical Society.”

“The Kentucky Historical Society erected a highway marker to commemorate the parish and the parish cemetery. The marker is located at the intersection of Lick Creek Road and Highway 68 in the former site of Golden Pond. The Tennessee Valley Authority in the Land Between the Lakes constructed a road to the historic cemetery in 1985. John F. Hall, Trigg County Historian.”

The Saint Joseph Parish Historical Marker contains the following words: “Settlement of German immigrants founded the first Catholic Church in the county, in 1882, a mission of the Louisville diocese. Prussian agriculture, architecture, and traditions flourished under their influence. Due to migration the parish declined about 1900, and the church was razed in 1925. Now the parish cemetery is all that remains of the European colony.”

In 1999, in what I consider to be poetic justice, Congress removed the TVA from the management of the LBL. It was transferred to the USDA Forest Service. For 34 years, the TVA LBL had disrespected and mistreated the citizens of Golden Pond. It intentionally destroyed the heritage of that town. The USDA Forest Service helped restore some of that heritage. In 2016, the dedication of the Golden Pond Interpretive Overlook, opened to the public. It can be seen from the two side by side historical markers. It's a good walk up the hill. Paula and I, looked through one of the glass panels, that sits on the edge of that Outlook. It has the etched outline of a house, where Paula and I once lived from 1965 to 1967. I was a young man, once, who fell in love with a beautiful girl, and a little town called Golden Pond.

John F. Hall

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