

THE HISTORIAN AT THE FENTON OVERLOOK

John F. Hall

I became a historian after I researched, and studied documents and other sources about the demise of Golden Pond. In 1989, I was in the library at Murray State University. Someone left a Sunday Louisville newspaper on one of the tables, next to where I was studying. In that newspaper was a several-page article, well written and highly researched, by a newspaper reporter, who gave a very detailed history of Golden Pond. That information would prove to be vital to obtain a Kentucky Historical Marker for the former town of Golden Pond. Each line on the Marker had to be supported by historical facts. This story is about the events involved in obtaining a marker for Golden Pond in 1970, and the dedication of the Fenton Overlook on September 30, 2023.



I was sitting in a chair, in the shade, in the former site of the town of Fenton, Kentucky. I was there, as an observer, for the unveiling of the Fenton Overlook. I had no part in the program. As a historian and a nonfiction short story writer, I am constantly in search of a new story. The unveiling of the Fenton Overlook was scheduled for 10:00 A.M., but some of the invited guests were running a little late. While waiting, I sent a happy birthday text to Jade Barkman, one of my surrogate granddaughters. She lives with her parents in Russellville, Kentucky. She is a student at Western Kentucky University, and she is working towards a Bachelor of Science Degree in Management. She called to thank me for the stories and the birthday gift that I sent by UPS. I told her that I was feeling old. She replied: "You're not that old." That's what I love about young people, they keep you young at heart. But I'm frail and weak at the age of 78. When I was 24, I acted like I was fearless and invincible. Now I use a cane when I walk for balance. My wife, the former Paula Andree Oakley of Golden Pond, was unable to attend. She had vertigo that morning and she decided to stay home. Like Jim Wallace, I had a very serious issue with my health in March of 2023, that almost killed me.

Jim Wallace, a former resident of Golden Pond, and a Fenton Overlook committee member, opened the program as he served as the master of ceremony. Danny Mitcheson, Also a former resident, gave the opening prayer. Jim Wallace gave a history of how the Land Between the lakes (LBL) was created. I put that brief history on one of the picture pages with this story. Jim ended his introductory remarks by saying, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Back in the day, 1981, I was blessed and very fortunate to be the youngest member, at the age of 36, to help establish the Trigg County Historical and Preservation Society. It was an honor to be asked, by the Society, to serve as their Historian for their 1985 and 1987, Trigg County, Kentucky History Books. Sadly, I'm the only member, that established the Trigg County Historical Society that is still alive. James Thweatt, Acting Area Supervisor of the U.S. Forest Service in the Land Between the Lakes, gave some brief remarks. He talked about the partnership that the Forest Service has with the Trigg County Historical Society, and the Fenton Overlook Committee, to make the Fenton Overlook a reality.

Donnie Holland, a former resident of Golden Pond, and committee member gave general remarks. He recalled driving thru the former town of Golden Pond, in the late 1960s, on highway 68/80. He watched as the TVA's bulldozers demolished all of the buildings and every trace and heritage of the people who once lived there. He highlighted how vicious the Tennessee Valley Authority, Land Between the Lakes (LBL) Director treated the LBL people back in the 1960s. He told how the TVA misused Eminent Domain to take private property and convert it to public use. The Fifth Amendment provides that the government may only use this power if they provide just compensation to the property owner. The TVA did not comply with the just compensation section of the law. They valued land at one third of its real value. If the land owner had timber on his property, and wanted to sell it, the TVA would deduct the value of that lumber from the value of the land. If the land owners did not want to sell their property, the TVA would have them arrested, and thrown into jail, with no bond. They would burn their houses with all of their personal property inside their houses. The TVA would burn their barns and bury whatever else would not burn. When the appropriations to the TVA, by Congress, were lowered, the TVA closed its best camping area. Then it demolished that camping area.

Stan Humphries, the Trigg County Judge Executive, talked about how fortunate Trigg County was to have a \$150 million dollar bridge going over Kentucky Lake, and a \$150 million dollar bridge going over Barkley Lake. He added that cities in Kentucky, going over the Ohio River, have been trying for years to get new bridges. As Stan was speaking, my mind drifted back to a memory when he married, many decades ago. I took some pictures at his wedding. For some reason, I forgot to give him the pictures. They got lost in a box with other pictures. I gave them to his secretary and told her to tell him, "Better Late than never." Stan told the crowd that he would work with the Forest Service and the Trigg County Historical Society to get easier access to the Golden Pond Overlook. It's a quarter of a mile walk from the parking lot to the Overlook. When it was dedicated, I followed my brother-in-law, Bruce Oakley up that steep, narrow, gravel path to reach the Overlook. Bruce is disabled, and I had to push his electric wheel chair, several times, when it got stuck in the gravel path.

Jim Wallace began the unveiling of the three Fenton Overlook panels. Part of the wording on the first panel contains the following information: "Looking west towards Eggner's Ferry Bridge and Kentucky Lake was the town of Fenton, Kentucky. Fenton was located about five miles west of Golden Pond near the Tennessee River in Trigg County. Fenton was named for John Fenton who was a colonel in the Civil War and owned Eggner's ferry. Fenton was located near one of the oldest ferries across the Tennessee River. It was first known as Pentecost ferry and was founded by Dr. John C. Pentecost who was a surgeon in the War of 1812. It was later operated by the Eggner family, and they gave their name to the ferry. For years, the ferry was operated by a mule that in turn operated a treadmill that turned the paddle wheel of the ferry boat."

My wife told me that when she was an elementary student, the elementary school in Golden Pond was consolidated into the elementary school in Cadiz. There was no bridge across the Cumberland River at that time. The school bus would pick up students from

Golden Pond, and get on the ferry to cross the Cumberland River. For safety reasons, all of the students on the bus, had to get off, and stand by the bus, as the ferry was crossing the Cumberland River. She remembers how cold it was, in the winter time, standing by the bus as it crossed the Cumberland River.

At the Fenton Overlook dedication, there was a large turn out. I put several pictures of the crowd in this story. Invited guest included nearby county leaders and state politicians. The Fenton Overlook committee members are Betty Jo Cossey, Retta Jones Balentine, Paula Crump Flood, Jo Ann Wallace Harvey, Donnie Holland, Vickey Oakley Lane, Faye Wallace Oakley, J.B. Oakley, Mark Turner, and Jim Wallace. The Forest Service present included Captain Donald Dill, Randall Mitchell, Christopher Thornock, and James Thweatt, the Acting LBL Forest Service Area Supervisor.

After the unveiling of the three Fenton Overlook panels, I talked to Donnie Holland. I shared with him a meeting that I had with the arrogant TVA, LBL Director back in 1969. I asked that LBL Director, if he would help me obtain a Kentucky Historical Marker to commemorate the former town of Golden Pond. He got really mad and his face turned red. He angrily said, No!!! We are using that name for our Headquarters.” George Bleidt, the last Postmaster of Golden Pond, had previously told me that I would be wasting my time. I told George that I had to at least try. After the meeting, I drove to the former site of the town of Golden Pond. I parked by the flower garden. I got out of my car and sat on the hood of my Chevy II. I was the last person to become a resident of Golden Pond. My mailing address was Post Office Box 56, Golden Pond, Kentucky. I felt a slight breeze. Baby birds were nesting in one of the trees in the flower garden. They began calling out for the mother bird to come and feed them. I lived in Golden Pond during the years 1964 to 1966. I prayed a simple four-word prayer: “God! Please help me.” I did not have a clue, as to what I wanted God to do. In the distance, I heard a dump truck gearing down on the hill leading into Golden Pond.

I heard, that God takes care of babies and fools. And I was on a fool’s mission. The dump truck pulled off highway 68/80, and came to a stop by the flower garden. TWO state highway workers got out of the truck. They were carrying their metal lunchboxes, and they walked over to the flower garden, and they sat down under a shade tree. I watched as they were eating their lunch. I cannot explain the unexplainable, but something had me get off of the hood of my car. It had me walk over to where the two highway workers were eating their lunch. Then something told me to ask, what I thought was a meaningless question, so I asked: “Is the flower garden on state highway right of way?” They both said that it was. I did not know the significance of their answer.

I researched and discovered that the Commonwealth of Kentucky never deeded highway 68/80, and its right of way, over to the TVA in the LBL. I called George Bleidt and told him what I discovered. I told him that the TVA has no authority or input into what the state can put in the flower garden. I petitioned the Kentucky Historical Society to put a historical marker, to commemorate the town of Golden Pond, in the flower garden. They told me to contact Roy McDonald. He was the Kentucky Historical Society’s Historical Marker Chairman in Trigg County. He provided me with the application for the Marker,

and he told me to work with George Bleidt on the wording. George was amazed that I was able to do an end run around the TVA. I went to George Bleidt's house in Cadiz, and we began to work on the wording for the Marker. George ask me for two favors. First, he did not want the word "moonshine" on the Marker. Second, he wanted the front door to the Wilson house, where Paula's grandmother, Iva Oakley once lived in Golden Pond.

The first time that I meet Paula Oakley, she pushed me off the front porch of the Wilson house. The TVA paid Iva Oakley for the Wilson house. She could move the two-story house, or let the TVA demolish it. She elected to have it demolished. I told my father-in-law, Andrew Oakley what George Bleidt wanted. He told me to let him have it. So I took the historical front door off its hinges, put it in the back of my pickup truck and drove it to George Bleidt's new house in Cadiz. I told Andrew that the fireplace mantel in the Wilson house needs to be saved. I removed the mantle from the wall. I had it refurbished. Today, it is in my house on Dyers Hill Road. When Roy McDonald retired, as the Kentucky Historical Society's Historical Marker Chairman in Trigg County, I was requested to succeed him.

In May of 1970, the Kentucky Historical Marker for Golden Pond was dedicated. Decades later, a decision had to be made, to relocate that Marker. The flower garden was scheduled to be paved over when highway 68/80 was enlarged from a two-lane to a four-lane highway. A meeting was called to decide where the Golden Pond Historical Marker was to be relocated. Jim Wallace, and a state highway engineer, a Forest Service official, and myself, as the Kentucky Historical Society's Historical Marker Chairman for Trigg County, met in Golden Pond. We agreed to move the Golden Pond Marker, and the St. Joseph Parish Marker, to the west side of the former town, and to place the Markers side by side. In a future story, the Good Lord willing, I will tell how I was dispatched, during my law enforcement days, to a report of vandalism at that, long forgotten Parish cemetery, located on a steep hill south of Golden Pond.

My oldest granddaughter, Andrea Hall calls me "An-Father." She told me that I mention Jesus Christ in most of my stories. It is because I am reminded of the words found in Matthew, Chapter 10, Verse 33: "But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven." I may never be able to convince anyone, with my inadequate words, that Christ answered my prayer that day in Golden Pond.

Jimmie Smith is the owner of the newly opened Golden Pond Distilleries in Canton, Kentucky. He was standing behind the first panel of the Fenton Overlook. After the unveiling, I walked over, my balance supported by my trusty cane, and talked to him. The first week that he opened his distilleries, I came to welcome him, and to wish him success. Jimmie asked if I had any pictures of Golden Pond. I had a photograph of my wife Paula, in my cell phone. She was standing under a Golden Pond highway sign, back in 1964, when we were dating. I did not own a car, at that time, and I would take a Greyhound bus from Fort Campbell to Hopkinsville. Then I would take another bus from Hopkinsville to Golden Pond. The bus would stop in between the Golden Pond Post Office, and the flower garden. I would get off. George Bleidt, the Postmaster, would wave from inside the Post Office, and I would wave back. I would walk, about a block, to

Paula's house. Her dad, Andrew Oakley did not know what to make of this soldier, but he let me borrow one of his cars, a Plymouth. The passenger side door was wrecked, and I cannot divulge how it was wrecked. I would take Paula to the movies, or the skating rink in Murray, Kentucky. When it was time to return to Fort Campbell, Paula would drive me to the flower garden, and we would wait for the bus. I would write to Paula, and she would walk to the Post Office to pick up my letters. George would kid her and say: "I saw you two spooning, last Sunday, waiting for the bus." I never fully realized how important that man was in my life.

I asked Jimmie to tell me how large a photograph did he want me to make of Paula. So I gave him a 24X 36 inch framed photograph of Paula. He put it on a wall in his distillery store. He asked an employee in the store to take a picture of his dad, me and him. I gave Jimmie a DVD of the Golden Pond Moonshine Era. It is a documentary in which I served as the Director, for the project, in cooperation with the TVA, the National Council on the Humanities, and the Trigg County Historical Society. For some reason, the TVA thought that I was an expert on moonshine. The Society asked me to do it, because no one would cooperate with the TVA. I only agreed to lead the project if I had final approval authority on the script. I had to provide a public demonstration of the making of moonshine. I had no budget, but just about everything that I needed was donated, to include the barrels, the corn, and the sugar. Billy Joe Hooks, was my real moonshiner. WPSD TV, Channel 6, out of Paducah, televised the demonstration. I paid \$10 of my own money, for a one-day permit, to the ATP, to legally make the moonshine.

The documentary was originally in a VHS tape cassette format. I converted one copy to a DVD format. I was thankful that I did, because the LBL Director, when he was removed from the LBL, retrieved all of the VHS cassettes that the TVA loaned out. As told by a former TVA employee, the LBL Director boxed up photographs and documents about Golden Pond, and had them removed from the Headquarters library. Jimmie set up a TV monitor and a DVD player, on a long display case, in his distillery store. He shows the DVD to his customers. Jimmie Smith's dream, for more than 10 years, was to open up a distillery, and call it the Golden Pond Distilleries.

September 30, 2023, in addition to being Jade Barkman's 20 birthday; was also Katie Harrison's 10th birthday. She lives about 800 feet, down Dyers Hill Road from my house, with her baby brother, her sister, Lilly, and her parents, Michelle and Corey Harrison. He is self employed, and a part-time Preacher, for the deaf, at a church in Clarksville, Tennessee. Corey's aunt lives in New York, and she gave Katie a horse for her birthday. Corey told my son, John that he was going to buy a second horse, I guess for Katie's sister, Lilly. The widow lady, that owns the farm, is letting Corey use the pasture field between our houses, for the two horses. Coming home, I noticed that Corey is trimming the lower branches of the trees along Dyers Hill Road, between our houses.

Corey will soon begin to fence in the pasture field. Memories came back to me, from decades ago. I would mow that pasture, and call up the cattle to feed them hay and corn. Back in 1966, when I was repairing the fences, to keep the cattle in, I would save those small cedar trees, fifteen feet apart. Now they are 40 feet tall. My next to the oldest

granddaughter, Heather Hall will claim that this is a book, rather than a long story. The other young people in my life, Skyler, Lexie, Isabella, and Dru would not agree. My other main readers, Nancy, Maria, Kelley, Audrey, Trish, Natalie, and Daniel, may say that it is not long enough. I write to give them enjoyment, and hopefully, inspiration.

I've been blessed and spoiled by Christ, more than I deserve. Shakespeare once wrote: "And all the men and women are merely players; they have their exists and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts." I became a historian and an advocate for Golden Pond, because I am a former resident of that town, that no longer exists. The LBL Director, who did every mean and spiteful thing, to eradicate the heritage and history of Fenton, Golden Pond, and the land Between the Rivers, was relieved of the supervision of the LBL. He was forced out of the LBL, along with those TVA employees that did his bidding. His legacy will be relegated to a dustbin of those individuals who abused and mistreated God-fearing people. He will be judged, as we all will be judged, for how we treated each other.

This historian, lays down his pen, in faithful homage to his Savior, for the grace upon grace upon grace, and for the inspiration, and the talent that he has received to write this story. The fondest memories, that I have, are of those times that Paula and I roamed the hills above Golden Pond. We were two teenagers in love, with each other, with the people, and with our town, Golden Pond. I was a soldier once, and young, who fell in love with a girl from Golden Pond name Paula Andree Oakley.

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