

## **HEROES, PLUMBERS, FARMERS AND WILLIE NELSON**

By John F. Hall

I am nostalgic about the “old west,” when land travel from the east coast to the west coast, was by train. Bobby Hart and Tommy Boyce wrote a song called, “Last train to Clarksville.” The song tells of a man phoning the woman that he loves, urging her to meet him at a train station in Clarksville before he must leave, possibly forever. These are a few of their lyrics: “Take the last train to Clarksville, and I’ll meet you at the station. You can be here by four thirty, ‘cause I made your reservation. Don’t be slow, oh no, oh no... ‘Cause I’m leaving in the morning, and I must see you again. We’ll have one more night together till the morning brings my train, and I must go. Oh no, no, no, and I don’t know if I’m ever coming home...”.

In 1973, Guy Clark wrote the country song, “Desperadoes Waiting for a Train.” The title of the song is somewhat misleading, and does not tell what the song is all about. The song tells of the relationship between a boy and an old man. Guy Clark said the story is about his grandmother’s boyfriend named Jack, who was a grandfather figure to him. It’s also a eulogy for the old man, Jack Prigg, an oil driller. Being a grandfather to my grandchildren, and my surrogate grandchildren, I can appreciate the love that the boy felt for the old man. I’ve witnessed and lived being involved with my grandchildren. At this twilight of my life, sharing my stories and staying in contact with them, is about the best that I can do.

These are most of Guy Clark’s lyrics: “I’d play the Red River Valley, and he’d sit in the kitchen and cry. And run his fingers through seventy years of livin’ and wonder, ‘Lord, has ever’ well I’ve drilled gone dry?’ We was friends, me and this old man. He’s a drifter and a driller of wells, and an old school man of the world. He taught me to drive his car when he was too drunk to. And he’d wink and give me money for the girls, and our lives was like some old western movie. From the time I could walk he’d take me with him, to a bar called the Green Frog Cafe. And there was old men with beer guts and dominoes, lying ‘bout their lives while they played. And I was just a kid that they all called his sidekick. One day I looked up and he’s pushing eighty, and there’s brown tobacco stains all down his chin. Well to me he’s one of the heroes of this country. So why’s he all dressed up like them old men? Drinking beer and playin’ Moon and Forty-two. And then the day before he died, I went to see him. I was grown and he was almost gone. So we just closed our eyes and dreamed us up a kitchen, and sang another verse to that old song.. . And we’re desperadoes waiting for a train. Like desperadoes waiting for a train. ..”. I do not recall, ever hearing the Red River Valley song, mentioned in Guy Clark’s song, “Desperadoes Waiting for a Train.”

The song was written by Carl Cotner. These are most of his lyrics: “From this valley they say you are going, I will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile, for they say you are taking the sunshine, that brightens our pathways awhile. I’ve been thinking a long time, my darlin’, of the sweet words you never would say, now, alas, all my fond hopes must vanish. For they say you are going away. Do you think of the valley you’re leaving? Oh, how lonely and sad it will be! Do you think of the kind hearts you’re breaking, and the

pain that you are causing to me? I have promised you, darlin', that never, will a word from my lips cause you pain; and my life, it will be yours forever, if you only will love me again. Come and sit by side if you love me, do not hasten to bid me a-dieu, but remember the Red River Valley, and the cowboy who loved you so true. . .”.

There is a sadness in the two songs, that mirrors some of the things happening in my life. I'm on the downward slide to turning eighty. My back is disintegrating, and my scarred lungs, damaged from second hand smoke, make it hard for me to breathe, or walk, any distance at all. It seems that some writers had to suffer some pain to gain notoriety. Earnest Hemingway was injured in several plane crashes, and he messed up his back. He had to stand up to type out his stories on a chest of draws. My wife, Paula, has a little pink timer pig. I turn the pig to put in 20 minutes. I will sit in my wheelchair, at the kitchen table, where I have my desktop computer. When 20 minutes have passed, a bell inside the pig timer will go off. I will say: "I spent my pig time, time to get up." By limiting myself, I can still type out my stories without too much pain.

I mentioned country singer, Willie Nelson in the title of this story. He owns a house in Nashville. I was driving an old Ford cattle truck from Cadiz to Oak Grove, Kentucky. At that time, I still had a Commercial Driver's License (CDL). The cattle truck belonged to my father-in-law, Andrew Oakley. It was almost out of fuel, so I pulled into the Flying J Travel Center at Interstate 24 - 41 A. This was back in 2013. I stopped at one of the gas pumps and turned the truck's ignition off. I went inside the Center, paid for the gas, in advance, purchased a snack, and walked out. Country singer, Willie Nelson was walking into the Center. I said: "Hi Willie. How are you?" He replied: "Fine. Thanks." He was in a hurry to get to a restroom, with no time to speak to this stranger. He was not wearing his customary durag or even a hat. He just looked like the old man of 80 years old, that he was at that time. His gray, thinning hair on the top of his head looked a mess. He had not shaved in several days. But that's Willie for you, comfortable in his wrinkled skin.

I drove the truck to a farm located at the end of a new subdivision in Oak Grove. The farm is owned by Mennonites. I needed to ask them for a favor. I pulled into the farmer's driveway, got out of the truck, and walked over to the oldest man with a beard. I asked him if he would sell me straw, and let me pay him, once I finished putting in 15 separate Septic systems in the subdivision. He agreed, and he called all of his family to load up the cattle truck with bales of straw. A bale of hay is made of dry grass and is usually made for animal feed. Straw is made from grain stalks, not suitable for animal feed. I needed the straw to cover over the septic lateral lines in the leach field. This is how waste water is distributed. My son, John, is a Master and Journeyman plumber. He was doing the plumbing in the 15 concrete slab houses. I was a certified Kentucky septic system installer, and a Tennessee Plumber Contractor. I used my old transit and ground rod to get the level ground measurements for my septic systems. My son is also a backhoe and track-hoe operator, but he was busy doing the plumbing.

My son located and hired an experienced backhoe operator. The black man lived in Hopkinsville. He had no vehicle, so we would pick him up and take him with us to Oak Grove. I rented a new John Deere backhoe. I could grade with it, but I was not a good

digger, especially when we had to dig the ten-foot hole for the concrete septic tank. The black man was the best operator that I had ever watched. He did some amazing work for me back in Cadiz. One day we were talking and he said to me: "Mr. John, you may not believe this, but I use to be married to Wilma Rudolph." I told him that I believed him. To be honest, I did not know who Wilma Rudolph was. I later learned that she was born in Clarksville, Tennessee. In 1960, she became the first American woman to win three gold medals in track and field at a single Olympics. She once said: "Winning is great, sure, if you are really going to do something in life, the secret is knowing how to lose. If you can pick up after a crushing defeat, and go on to win again, you are going to be a champion someday." I don't know if the backhoe operator's name is Robert Eldridge. If so, they divorced in 1980.

One day, I drove to Hopkinsville to pick up my track hoe operator. He was not on his porch waiting for me. I went around to the back of his house. I found him stoned on crack cocaine. I told him that I needed the key to the backhoe. He said that he would be okay in a day or so. I knew that he was deceiving himself. Maybe that key gave him some sort of false security. I had back-up keys. It was the last time that I saw him. I told my son that he would have to dig the holes for the septic tanks. I would do the rest of the ground work.

The subdivision Job Contractor called me to his office. He said they may have to file for bankruptcy. And that I may not be paid for two the septic systems that I just put in. The systems were inspected and approved by the Christian County Environmentalist.

I told the Job Contractor, in that case, I will have file a Mechanics lien against the two properties in the subdivision where I installed the septic systems. I felt that the Job Contractor thought I was stupid. I'm confident that he talked to a lawyer, and that person told him, that since I did not have a contract, that I would not win in Court. I was surprised that he was trying to cheat me. I gave him a week, and then I filed two Mechanics liens. The liens can only be for labor and materials. Legal and other fees are not allowed. Each lien cost me \$27.00 to file. I served the Job Contractor by mailing him a copy of the lien. Kentucky is one of only six states in the United States that requires a contract. I did not have a contract to put in the 15 septic systems. I was paid for the other 13 septic systems. The proof that I put in the systems was the Christian County Environmentalist. I had to provide him with a design for each system, and he had his documentation for approval for each system. I remember the lyrics in the song, "The Gambler," written by Don Schlitz. These are just a few of his lyrics: "You've got to know when to hold 'em. Know when to fold 'em. Know when to walk away, and when to run." It was time for me to walk away, and end my days as a septic system installer.

I told my son to load up the back-hoe, as we would take it back to the equipment rental place the next day. We had been on Interstate 24, just a few miles from 41 A, when the truck ran out of fuel. I think that someone siphoned the gas out of the truck's fuel tank. It did not have a gas cap that you could lock. My son was driving and he pull onto the shoulder of the Interstate. I put out the emergency reflective triangles. I noticed a farm house and I told my son to stay with the truck and trailer. I climbed over the highway

fence, and walked to the farm house. I knocked on the front door. I stood in amazement as the man opened the front door. It was Dr. Brooks Major, the retired Hopkinsville Community College (HCC) Dean of Students, and a retired Pastor. I told Dr. Major, I just needed a few gallons of gas to get to a service station. He is the same man that helped me find a part time job when I was a freshmen at HCC back in 1966. He is the same man that allowed me to do my student teaching at HCC in 1978. And the same man that offered me an instructor position at HCC. I had to decline, because I was obligated to stay in law enforcement for five years. Dr. Major had a gas can in his pick up, that was full of gas. He drove across his pasture field to the cattle truck. My son put the gas in the truck. I pulled out my wallet and ask Dr. Major how much did I owed him for the gas. He said: "John, you don't owe me anything." He was such a blessing to me. He is one of the heroes in this country. I don't know how to properly thank him, maybe this story will keep alive his memory.

Several months went by, and two people wanted to buy the houses built by the Job Contractor. The problems, these two perspective buyers ran into, is that they could not get "clear titles." And their mortgage company would not approve their home loan until the Mechanics liens were released. I told my son that even if the Job Contractor does not pay us, I will pay the Mennonite for the straw out of my personal funds. The Job Contractor realized that he had over played his hand. He was holding four deuces, and I was holding four "Aces." So he had to come to me. I'm sure his lawyer told him that he could not force me to release the liens, since he had not paid me for the two septic systems. The Job Contractor paid me for the two septic systems, plus my expenses getting and releasing the liens. I drove to the Mennonite farmer's house. I apologized for being so late in paying him for the straw. I explained that the Job Contractor was holding up paying me. The farmer invited me inside. His family was eating at their kitchen table. He invited me to join them. I told him that I just would like something to drink. The farmer came back and handed me a handwritten bill. He said: "Is this amount in agreement with your amount?" I did not have my ledger and I said: "You trusted me, when I told you that I would pay for the straw, when I finished putting in the septic systems. I just got paid for the last two systems that I put in. You trusted me, and I trust you that your amount is correct." In 1 Samuel, Chapter 16, Verse 7, are these words: "But the Lord said to Samuel: Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature, because I have rejected him. God does not see as a mortal, who sees the appearance. The Lord looks into the heart." I learned so much working with the soil. So many times, Christ has put people into my life, to help me. There is something about Divine Intervention, that has touched my life, so many times. How much of a coincidence was it, that the cattle truck ran out of fuel at Dr. Brooks Major's pasture field? If a person's word is not their bond, then their promise is false.

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