

## THE PHOTOGRAPH

By John F. Hall

This is a true story about a photograph that was taken over 50 years ago. It's a photograph that Arvil Birdsong took of me spray painting a wrecked fire truck that Denzil Bridges located back in 1970. It was Denzil's goal to establish a volunteer fire department to serve the citizens of western Trigg County. This is the story behind that photograph. I write stories within stories within stories. And this story tells about the history of the Wildhaired Hilltoppers and the parades and recognition that this group received. I tell about a one-day permit to make legal moonshine and a few other things.



For the past decade, I would be the first to arrive at the small church that I attend, west of Cadiz, Kentucky. I would gain entry to the church by unlocking a side door. Once inside the church, I would turn on all of the lights. I would then go and unlock the main entrance door. There is a peaceful solitude of being in that

church with Christ. I believe that He has blessed me with the grace and the inspiration to write nonfiction stories based on my experiences and observations. My fellow usher, Gus Puth is usually the second person to arrive at the church. I mentioned the photograph that shows me spray painting a wrecked fire truck in 1970. That truck became the first East Golden Pond Volunteer Fire Department's fire truck. Gus is a



member of that fire department. He had not seen the photograph and he did not know the history behind that photograph. A young couple, Ciera Crain and her boy friend, Kyler Bohn walked into the church. Ciera's dad was in the 82nd Airborne Division. He was a paratrooper, just like I was a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne Division. Military families have an infinity for each other. I mailed my oldest granddaughter, Andrea some pictures that I took of her outside of the church. We were standing next to one of the former Pastors. Andrea is 26, and her sister, Heather is 25. Their brother, John is 21. Funny, how time slips away.

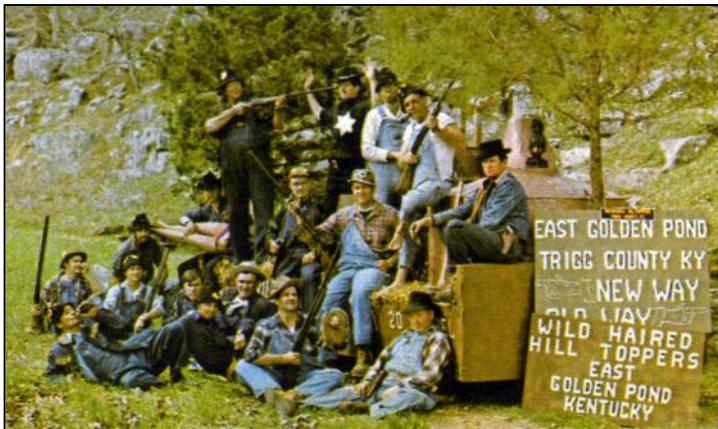
Going back to 1970, I lived in a tiny mobile home that measured 12 feet by 45 feet. My neighbor, Sam Armstrong, let me park my mobile home on his property, rent free, after we did a little bartering. I had to tear down an abandoned, dilapidated house where he wanted me to put my trailer. The lot had a cistern that required water delivery. I paid for a water meter so I could be put on the county water system. It had a good septic system. I had to put up an electric meter pole. My wife, Paula worked as a clerk/typist on Fort Campbell. She car pooled with her mother and two others that also worked on that Army Post. They would take our little son, John to a babysitter in Hopkinsville.

There was what I could best describe as a “black widow” cat that decided she wanted us to feed her. When she would have kittens, she would lay on the Maple Grove Road. Her kittens would follow her to the road. She would nurse them until the last moment and run from an approaching car. The kittens could not move that fast and they would be run over. She killed all her kittens that way. One day she just disappeared. I suspect that a coyote had her for supper. I had a high mileage Chevy II car that needed to be overhauled. The piston rings in the motor were worn out and the car's exhaust would billow out white smoke. I should have asked Paula's brother, Bruce Oakley to help me.

I became a “Shade Tree” mechanic by necessity because I could not afford to pay an experienced mechanic to overhaul my Chevy II. I would go over to Arvil Birdsong's house. He had an auto repair garage next to his house. I remember his little daughter riding her tricycle, and going round and round in that garage. Arvil was a friend and an excellent mechanic. He gave me instructions on how to take the drive shaft out of the engine without having to take the motor out of the car. The first time I replaced the piston rings, I incorrectly put two of the pistons in the wrong order. The motor locked up. I had to pull the drive shaft out the second time and put the pistons in the correct order. After I fixed the Chevy II, I began to take my son to the babysitter. Those were the days when there was no mandatory seat belt laws or child seats requirement. I would lay my son on the passenger side floor board, and I had a pillow for him to rest his head.

In exchange for giving me mechanical advice, and selling me the piston rings, gaskets, and other overhaul parts, at his cost, I bartered with Arvil Birdsong to help him overhaul the wrecked fire truck that Denzil had towed to Arvil's property next to his garage. Arvil was also an excellent welder, but he did not like to paint. I liked to spray paint and I enjoyed spry painting the wrecked fire truck. Denzil owned and operated the Hilltop Cash Market. His wife, Ruth also managed the store. Later, their son, Scott got involved. I like to take pictures with my inexpensive camera. Film was very affordable. One day, I was spray painting the back of the fire truck. I had my camera with me and I asked Arvil to take my picture holding the sprayer. I put my mask on the top of my head for the picture.

I don't recall if it was Arvil Birdsong or Denzil Bridges that got me involved in a new



group that was being formed for the Trigg County Sesquicentennial. I was 25 years old and an Army Veteran. Denzil Bridges called for a meeting, at the Hilltop market, with a group of businessmen, farmers, and professional people to establish the Wildhaired Hilltoppers. The purpose was, to entertain the public during the

Sesquicentennial. Denzil Bridges became the president of the Wildhaired Hilltoppers.

Arvil Birdsong became the secretary-treasurer. I became the Chief Revenoorer. Ronnie Gray and James Lancaster were my Deputies. The other members of this group were Howard Allen, Freddie Bryant, John Bryant, Tony Carr, Kelsie Calhoun, Boyd Champion, Herbert Cossey, Guy Delacy, Smiley Freeman, Charles Gray, Pink Guier, Don Jordan, Hollis Littlejohn, Robert Mitchell, Tommy Noel, 'Doc' Shelton, Bob Rogers and Robert Skillion.

Denzil Bridges painted his World War II vintage jeep in the colors of red, white, and blue. He had an authentic moonshine still that he put



on his long trailer. He made a parade float that included real mash fermenting in an oak barrel. Fresh maple trees were cut to add realism to the float. The Wildhaired Hilltoppers dressed in bib overalls, many with beards and mountain men hats. In the cold weather I dressed in warm clothes to include a t0p hat, long coat, bow tie and a large badge on the front of the coat. We had some pet groundhogs on the

float, to guard the moonshine still. Denzil mounted an eight track stereo system on the hood of the jeep. It would play the song, “Good Old Rocky Top” over and over again. The float was an instant hit.

The Trigg County Judge Executive, The Cadiz Mayor, and the President of the Chamber of Commerce praised the Wildhaired Hilltoppers for the goodwill it brought to Cadiz and Trigg County. The group averaged two to three parades a month ranging from Portland, Tennessee, to Pickneyville, Illinois. The group won first place in the Evansville, Indiana Fall Festival of 1971. The group was honored with Colonel Commissions by Governor Louis B. Nunn and they participated in the inaugural parade for Governor Wendell Ford. Most of the members of the Wildhaired Hilltoppers were former residents of Golden Pond before the town was taken over, by the TVA, to make the Land Between the Lakes. The group was featured on WSM-TV, Nashville, Tennessee, and WPSD-TV, Paducah, Kentucky.

I remember walking with Ronnie Gray in the middle of the street at the Inaugural parade, in Frankfort, Kentucky, for Governor Wendell Ford in 1971. I was in black, with a cowboy hat, large over sized badge, and bow tie. I can't recall the number of times that the moonshiners “bested” me in gun battles. I would fall to the ground and my long single barrel shotgun would break apart. After the shoot-out, I would get up and jump on the float, and wave to the crowd. The parade crowds loved it. They would clap and cheer. We were actors that entertained the public. We became televised entertainers. All of the Wildhaired Hilltoppers volunteered their time and paid for the travel expenses going to parades and festivals in Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, and Tennessee.

The legacy of the Wildhaired Hilltoppers is that many of them went on to form the East Golden Pond Volunteer Fire Department, which provides a valuable services to the citizens of western Trigg County. In 1972, I became a driver’s license examiner for the Kentucky State Police, and then I went on to the Kentucky State Police Academy.

Playing the role of the Chief Revenoorer might have influenced me to go into law enforcement.

I became very interested in Kentucky history after I obtained a Kentucky Historical Marker for the former town of Golden Pond in 1970. I became friends with the retired Trigg County Schools Superintendent, Tom Vinson. He asked me to join him and several others to establish the Trigg County Historical & Preservation Society. I was the youngest founding member at the age of 36. Tom was 51 years old. I would drive my State Police car over to Tom's house. I would get out and sit under a shade tree with Tom. We would talk about the need for a Trigg County History book. It had been 100 years since William Henry Perrin wrote a history of Trigg County. I became the Historian for that history book that was published in 1985.

I had no love for the TVA since they made me, my wife, Paula, her parents, and everyone else move out of Golden Pond. Paula's grandfather, Chester Oakley was a part of the whiskey commerce of that town. In the Trigg County History Book, I wrote about the Golden Pond Moonshine Era. In the late 1980s, the TVA applied for a grant from the Kentucky Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities to make a documentary film about the Golden Pond Moonshine Era. The big problem that the TVA faced is that none of its staff knew any Golden Pond Moonshiners.

Somehow, the TVA thought that I was an expert on Golden Pond moonshine. The only time that I had anything to do with moonshine was when my father-in-law asked me if I would like a drink of white wine. I knew that he gathered muscadine grapes to make muscadine wine. So he gave me a small glass and I took a good swallow, I like to have choked. It was moonshine, "white lightning" and it burned all the way to my stomach.

The TVA knew better than to ask me to help them. But somehow, the Trigg County Historical and Preservation Society was mentioned in the grant. The TVA asked the Society to persuade me to direct the film. I had made training films for the Army Reserve, so I had some experience in making films. I reluctantly agreed to be the Director of the documentary film only if I had total control over the final narrative. So the TVA agreed.

I had interviewed, confidentially, several Golden Pond moonshiners for the Trigg County History Book. I knew exactly who I wanted to be the Chief Moonshiner. It was Billy Joe Hooks. He had been arrested once for making moonshine. His uncle, Joe Bogard, was the largest distiller of whiskey in Golden Pond. He also raised Billy Joe. E was not sure if I could get Billy Joe to help me. I obtained a one-day permit to legally make moonshine from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF). The public demonstration would be held not too far from the former town of Golden Pond.

I was driving to Louisville, Kentucky, since I was also in the IMF" Training Division, Army Reserve. I went to Bluegrass Cooperage in Louisville and asked if they would donate a six barrels for the moonshine demonstration. I told them that they would receive credit for the barrels donation in the film. I was in a my Ford Ranger pickup and they

loaded six barrels in the back. I persuaded local businesses in Cadiz, Kentucky to donate sugar and corn and other things that I needed. The show stopper would be Billy Joe Hooks. I went to his house and told him that I needed his help. I told him that WPSD-TV, Paducah, Kentucky would interview him, and after the mash was ready, he could legally make moonshine for one day. He said he would do it if I made him a char-can. It is basically a metal container that is filled with cotton. It is used to filter out impurities in the moonshine. I told him to draw me the dimensions. I told the TVA that if they wanted to have the moonshine demonstration, they would have to pay for the char-can. They agreed. I had the char-can made in a tin shop in Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

Two retired ATF agents came to the moonshine demonstration. I guess that they were reliving their glory days of smashing moonshine stills. Billy Joe Hooks was interviewed by WPSD-TV. He was loving the attention, as was his helpers: Boyce Birdsong and Arvil Birdsong. I made a separate film, during the demonstration, called, "The Boy and the Moonshiners." My nephew, Dale Garner played the role of the "Boy" in the film. I'm not sure what his parent's Marsha and Roger Garner thought about that.

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