

SOUTHERN NIGHTS

By John F. Hall

This is a story about singers, song writers, Kentucky governors, a horse race, Derby parties, fast runs on the interstate between Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky, and people that I met during one week in May 1979. As I was writing this story, I realized that my selection to be Larry G. Townsend's security/driver was not a random selection. The previous month I was given a Direct Commission as a First Lieutenant in the Kentucky Army National Guard. At that time, the Kentucky Adjutant General, Billy G. Wellman was also serving as the Commissioner of the Kentucky State Police. He was holding down two jobs. I was in the Army Reserve at the time and submitted a packet to the National Guard in Frankfort. For the life of me, I don't know why I decided to call General Wellman's assistant, Glen Birdwhistle. I don't know where the words came from, but I said to Glen, "I don't have a sponsor." To my surprise he answered, "You do now." He put my packet on General Wellman's desk and it was signed the next day. I suspect that Governor Brown and General Wellman had a conversation and he asked General Wellman who he would recommend to be Larry Townsend's driver. I believe that is when he recommended me. At that time I had eight years experience as a Trooper, college degrees from Murray State, an Army veteran, and a great driving record.

When I write a story, I usually have a song in mind to enhance the theme of the story. In 1979, I was dispatched from Trigg County to travel to Frankfort for a security detail. It was the week of the Kentucky Derby and famous people were flying in from all over the United States to see the Derby horse race and to attend private Derby parties. From Interstate 65, the public could see rows of private and corporate Lear jets using most of the available parking space at Standiford airport (now called Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport). I was given the assignment to be the security/driver for Larry G. Townsend. He was Governor John Y. Brown's main political adviser and Secretary of Development. In 1979, Governor Brown interrupted his 1979 honeymoon with Phyllis George, to jump into the governor's race. His wife is the 1971 Miss American and a former television sportscaster. The governor purchased Kentucky Fried Chicken from Harland Sanders in 1964 and turned it into a worldwide success. He sold his interest in the company in 1971 for a huge profit. Today, the company is worth \$12.6 billion dollars.

What I learned about Larry Townsend is that he was an Army veteran, had an insurance background and he was a fast car enthusiast. The day before the Kentucky Derby horse race, I drove Larry from Frankfort to Lexington. This is a story within a story. Governor Brown lived in the Executive Mansion in Frankfort with his family for one month. The State Fire Marshal declared the mansion to be a fire trap. So the governor immediately moved his family to his Cave Hill estate in Lexington. When I drove Larry to the Governor's home, I waited outside in the hot sun. There was a controversy with a Trooper assigned to the Governor's security detail and the Governor's wife. I was not given any details and I was told not to go inside the house for any reason. The Lieutenant Governor, Martha Layne Collins was inside the house. She came outside and gave us lemonade to drink.

The truth be known, Lieutenant Governor Collins ran the state about 25% of the time when Governor Brown was jetting out of state. She succeeded Governor Brown as Governor. One time she flew down to the Lake Barkley State Resort Park west of Cadiz, Kentucky, to attend a meeting at the convention center. She is the first and only female Governor of Kentucky. After her plane landed, I drove over to the plane. I opened the front passenger side door. She requested to sit in the back seat of the police car. I guess my red face gave away my embarrassment because that is where I put people that I arrest. She graciously said, "Don't you worry about it. I have some papers that I need to spread out and organize." So I closed the front door and opened the rear passenger car door. I asked her to be careful and not hit her head. I felt like I was arresting the governor.

One time I was dispatched to the Park's airport to take US. Senator Wendell Ford to the convention center. I opened the front passenger side door for the senator. He was a very soft spoken gentleman. We talked like we were old friends. On another occasion, I was dispatched to the airport to take Governor Julian Carroll to the convention center. I opened the passenger side front door. As as he was getting in, he noticed an Operation Identification sticker on the front seat. He picked it up and told me this story, "They mentioned on television that I was going to a political rally with my family. While we were away, someone broke into my house and stole some things including a gold fingernail clipper. I had engraved my social security numbers on the clippers. They caught the thief and he had my clippers in his pocket. He was convicted because my social security numbers were on those clippers." Today, I would not recommend that people put their social security numbers on their personal property. They should put their driver's license number.

When I was driving Larry Townsend, I was amazed at the number of locations he had to visit. I was in uniform and the State Police car got us to where he needed to go. Larry always sat up front. There was a big party at the new Commonwealth Convention Center in Louisville. Townsend and I arrived at the front doors and parked in the no parking zone. We went inside. The main attraction of the night was bell. Also, Roger Miller performed. Larry told me to standby as we would not be staying very long. Governor Brown would just make a few remarks, listen to Glen Campbell sing the song, "Southern



Nights," and then his security detail would take him somewhere else. I was looking for a restroom and I met Glen Campbell. He was getting ready to sing. We said a few words and he was gone. I had not gotten very far and I met Roger Miller.

(Pictured: Roger Miller and Glen Campbell)

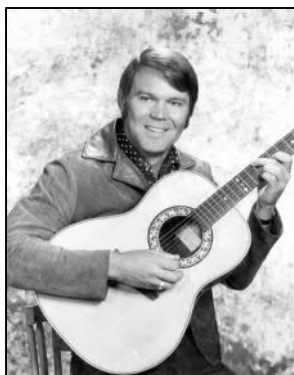
We talk about a few things and I told him that I really needed to get to the restroom. I found a restroom and when I finished, I went back and watched Glen Campbell break through a 'life size picture of himself. Above the picture were the words, "Southern Nights." Glen sang that song. As soon as he finished

the song, Larry Townsend said to me, “John Let's go.” It was a crazy week with so many private parties that Larry directed me to go to. He was a master fund raiser. He would just say a few words to the millionaire donors and move on to the next party. Larry wanted me to get there as fast as the police would go. I called these drives, “blue light times.” I got to like Larry. He died in 2012 at the age of 71.

Allen Toussaint wrote the song, “Southern Nights.” His friend, Van Dyke Parks stopped by one day and asked him this question, “Well, consider that you were going to die in two weeks. If you knew that, what would you think you would like to have done? Allen did not answer Van Parks' question, but when Van left, Allen wrote, “Southern Nights.” The song tells about Allen's idyllic evenings growing up in Louisiana when he would travel into the country and visit the older folks. He said, “They were people from our ancestors, and we loved them a lot.” Glen Campbell chose to record the song, “Southern Nights” because it reminded him of his rural childhood in Arkansas. He said, “My dad told me when I was a kid, you're having the best time of your life, and you don't know it. Sure enough, he's right. Now I really feel the need to go back home, float down the Missouri River, and fish for bass and crappies. It's real peaceful, and remote from things like television.” Today, with the nation on stay—at-home orders, due to the pandemic, the cell phone with its texting capability, keeps people connected to each other. Sometimes, just a few words can bring comfort during these scary times.

These are some of the lyrics that Allen Toussaint wrote, “Southern nights, have you ever felt a southern night? Free as a breeze, not to mention the trees. Whistling tunes that you know and love so. Southern nights, just as good even when closed. I apologize to anyone who can truly say, that he has found a better way. Southern skies have you ever notices southern skies? Its precious beauty lies just beyond the eye. It goes running through their soul. Like the stories told of old, old man. He and his dog that walked the old land. Ev'ry flower touches his cold hand, as he slowly by. Weeping willows would cry for joy. Joy!”

When I met Glen Campbell, who was at the top of his singing career in 1979, my concern, at that time, was Larry Townsend's security and getting him safely where he needed to go. That year, the State Police asked me to teach at the KSP Academy in Frankfort. I declined their offer for several reasons. My wife, Paula had a good paying job at Fort Campbell. My dad wanted me to quit the State Police because he felt they were getting expert help dirt cheap. And I did not like Frankfort and all the political games played in that city.



The short time that I talked to Roger Miller in the Convention Center, I liked his down to earth conversation. He had served three years in the Army. He did not let his lack of a college education stop him from writing and singing his songs. Sadly, 13 years after our meeting, he died from lung and throat cancer at the age of 56. Glen Campbell was my age when he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. He fought that disease for six years before he died. His wife, Kim plans to open a Glen Campbell Museum in Nashville this year. As I was writing this story, I

watched Glen Campbell singing with his daughter, Ashley on YouTube. It's an old video where they were on British television on his final tour. Ashley is a very talented banjo player. More importantly, the love she shows for her father is very heart warming.

I believe that song writers are excellent story tellers. Their words reach out and touch the reader's soul. When I was ten years old and growing up in Miami, Florida, it seemed that when ever I heard the song "Moon Over Miami," there was a full moon shining over the city. I've never seen Jade's Skyler's or Lexie's eyes when they read my stories. I believe they shine with joy as my words touch their souls. John Burke and Edgar Leslie wrote the song, "Moon Over Miami." These are their lyrics, "Moon over Miami, shine on my love and me, so we can stroll besides the roll, of the rolling sea. Moon over Miami, shine on as we begin a dream or two that may come true, when the tide comes in. Hark to the song of the smiling troubadours, hark to the throbbing guitars, hear how the waves offer thunderous applause, after each song to the stars. Moon over Miami, you know we're waiting for, a little love, a little kiss, on Miami shore. "

In Revelations, Chapter 12, Verse 23, are these words, "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is it's lamp." I'm a little nostalgic for those wistful memories of those tropical summer nights.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:
<http://www.ajlambert.com>