

THE W ROAD ON SIGNAL MOUNTAIN

By John F. Hall

My niece, Joan Williams, lives in a gated community in Walden's Ridge, on Signal Mountain, Tennessee. Six years ago, on a return trip from Florida, my wife, Paula and I



went to visit my niece on that mountain top. Driving up and driving down that Signal Mountain road is not for the faint of heart. The mountain is twenty minutes north of Chattanooga. It is nearly 1,800 feet above sea level. The town of Signal Mountain has a population of nearly 8,600 people. That is more than four times the number of people who live in my home town of Cadiz, Kentucky. Signal Mountain, prior to the Civil War, had only a few families living there. The Native American Indians used a point on the mountain to send smoke signals across the Tennessee Valley.

In 1913, Charles E. James purchased 4,490 acres of land to develop on Signal Mountain. On April 4, 1919, the Tennessee Legislature passed a bill that Chartered the town of Signal Mountain. In 2013, Signal Mountain made Bloomberg Businessweeks' list of the best places to raise a family. This story is about a road going up Signal Mountain. I'm a retired Kentucky State Police Trooper, with hundreds of thousands of safe driving miles, mixed in with some horrific hot pursuits. I thought that I could easily traverse any road in Tennessee with ease, until I decided to visit my niece, Joan Williams, on Signal Mountain. I was 72 years old at the time.

The W Road, leading to my niece's home on Signal Mountain, intimidated me. Its multiple hairpin turns, turned my graying hair into a whiter shade of scarred white. I felt confident going up the W Road, but I had some serious reservations about going down the W Road. When I was a young Trooper, I would peg the speedometer on my police cruiser, just to see how fast it would go. But after years of seeing how speed kills, I became a very cautious driver. In 1892, construction of the W Road began. It took 11 months of work at the cost of \$11.00 (about \$330,00 in today's dollars) to complete the road. The W Road was first surfaced with dirt. In 1911, it was laid with gravel. At the top of the W Road, at that time, was a community called Summertown. It had a post office, a store, and a pavilion for dances. The dances were discontinued after a moonshiner shoot-out between rival bootleggers, during the Prohibition area. The pavilion was burned down shortly after that incident.

In 1927, the W Road underwent a major renovation. It was paved and widened to 20 feet, and road drains were installed. It was again widened in 1940. Hamilton Bush, a local historian, wrote this about the W Road: "The W Road remains the most notorious for its three incredibly sharp, steep hairpin turns, with switchbacks so tight that it's necessary to roll one's vehicle to a stop, peek around the bend, and make sure that there's room to make your turn depending on the oncoming traffic." Going up the W Road, I was totally unprepared for the down coming traffic. Several times I got as close to the side of the mountain as I could. I was relieved when Paula and I arrived at the end of W Road. It

ended in front of a gate. I called my niece, Joan Williams, to give me the combination to open the metal gate, so I could drive into the gated community where she lives

My niece has a very nice, large cabin house, on a large lot. Once inside, we talked about old times. Back in 1970, she came with her parents to visit me. At that time, I was living in a small mobile home, with Paula and my young son, John. Sam Armstrong let me park my mobile home there, in exchange for tearing down an old tenant house on that lot.

My mind was preoccupied, with my concern about finding a dermatologist surgeon. I had a deadly skin cancer on my forehead. My local dermatologist had froze the spot off my forehead, twice. He was not a surgeon, and he said that we needed to watch that affected area. He did not take a biopsy, and I was getting this sinking feeling that he did not know what he was doing. Joan let me use her home phone to call dermatologists in Nashville. I got lucky. Dr. Natalie Curcio had a cancellation for the next day. I made an appointment to see her. I was no stranger to skin cancer. In 1990, I was mobilized on Fort Knox, for Desert Storm. My wife told me to have a spot checked on my back. I went to the Army hospital. The doctor in the emergency room told me to take off my uniform shirt and tee shirt, to examine the spot on my back. Then he told me a story. He said that a soldier, with a similar spot, had ignored his wife's pleading that he have that spot examined. He kept putting it off for six months. By the time the soldier came to me, it was too late. The melanoma cancer had spread, and six months later, that soldier was dead. The Army doctor told me to lay, face down, on an examination table. He sprayed some numbing solution on and around the spot. He got a scalpel, and he cut out the spot on my back. The Army doctor stitched up the hole, and said that I was fit for duty.

The thought of having to drive down the W Road began to worry this old Trooper. When I was 16, I was with my brother, Charles. We were in Desert Hot Springs, California. I disliked the desert and the naked, gray, bare mountains. Signal Mountain is different with trees. Brookish Ner Dan wrote the short poem, "The Mountains Grow Unnoticed." These are his words: "The Mountains Grow Unnoticed. The purple figures rise without attempt, exhaustion, assistance, or applause. In their eternal faces the sun, with just delight, looks long, and last, and golden, for fellowship at night."

R. J. Stevens wrote the hymn, "The Mountain Song." These are some of his lyrics: "Oh Lord, I need a mountain to climb on: just a quiet place to go and know that You'll there. Oh Lord, I need to spend some time with You; spend the night with You, dear Lord, in prayer. And the greatest Friend you'll ever find is on a lonely mountain. And the highest high you'll ever feel is when you kneel to pray. And the brightest light you'll ever see is when you close your eyes. O Lord, You are my first love; at last I realize. O Lord I thought the day would never dawn, when I'd lay my burdens down and walk with You: But this morning as I met the morning sun, I felt, dear Lord, my dreams had all come true...".

Paula and I said goodbye to my niece, Joan, and we started down the W Road. I was thankful for the guardrails on one side of the road. The first hairpin turn that I came to, made me come to a complete stop.

A car was coming up the hill, and I was as close to the mountain side as I could get. I slowly made my way to the second hairpin turn, and my car nearly slid into the guardrail. I was only going a few miles an hour. I guess that I should have been going turtle speed. When I arrived at the third hairpin turn, I stopped, and rolled down my driver's side window. I listened for the sound of any vehicles coming up the W Road. Once off Signal Mountain, it was 134 miles to Nashville, and my appointment with Dr. Natalie Curcio. The biopsy confirmed that it was cancer, and it had gotten down to my skull. Dr. Curcio removed a section of my skin, about the size of a silver dollar. She arranged for me to go, immediately after the surgery, to plastic surgeon, Dr. David Gilpin. As soon as he saw the amount of removed skin, he sent me to the TriStar Skyline Medical Center Hospital. He then performed out-patient general surgery. So great was his surgical skills, that he was able to repair my forehead skin without a skin graft, and without leaving any scars. He asked my permission to use picture of the before and after skin repair. And I gave him that permission.

At the age of 78, I tend to view two-lane roads as being treacherous. I don't recall who said to me: "Driving on a two-lane road is a lot like playing Russian roulette. Being distracted, even for a few seconds, might cause you to have a head-on collision. Another person told me that, not wearing your car seat belt, is having a person disregard for your own safety. Before I retired from the Kentucky State Police (KSP) in 1988, it seemed like that organization was working me into the ground. I would come on duty for the night shift, and I would ask the Dispatcher this question: "Who else is on with me?" The Dispatcher would reply: "Just you." I patrolled an area from the Christian County line to the Mississippi River, and from the Tennessee state line, on the south, to the Illinois state line to the north.

On April 12, 2024, I had back surgery to repair my fractured T12 vertebra. I had a CT Scan at Baptist Health Imaging on April 24th. I had my back brace on when I went to my pulmonary physician, Dr. Sugata Sensarma. He pulled up, on a computer monitor, the CT Scan of my lungs, taken on March 3, 2023, when I was a patient at Baptist Health Hospital. We both looked at the scans. He said they are about the same. I don't smoke, but my lungs were scarred from second hand smoke during my service in the military from 1962 to 2005. I was using two inhalers, and he wanted me to have an emergency inhaler, in case I became very short of breath. My son had a plumbing invoice that needed to be given to the office manager of an apartment complex in Symsonia. After I left the doctor's office, I put the apartment address in my "Waze" app. It wanted me go 15 miles out of my way. My wife uses the Google Map app, and it sent us directly to the location. After dropping off the invoice, I turned onto KY 358. That is one treacherous road.

We don't have to go, to the top of Signal Mountain to experience the highest high, by getting down on our knees to pray. In Matthew, Chapter 6, Verse 6 are these words about where to go to pray: "But when you pray, go to your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

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