

# The Bridge Works <sup>©</sup> <sup>®</sup>

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a celebration of the spirit of community within the creative process

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## Environmental Complexities

Early blessed by woods and fields to roam, I learned that being alone is not the same as being lonely, as I can be quite lonely in a crowd and quite content with only the bluejays and chickadees to talk to.

I also learned that some of Life's most dangerous "swamps" and quagmires can be concrete sidewalks and terrazzo tile floors; ah, beware — what you say (or don't say) or how you look can mire you up to the neck within some situations, with nary a speck of mud on your clothes, yet rendering you speechless with a head full of un-yelled protests and a heart full of frustration.

I cry when I see Hollywood exploit and exaggerate the dangers of wilderness areas as ways to employ stuntmen who need to dare yet more incredible feats to keep getting hired, profiting from the fear they generate that can discourage family adventure — "Oh, we can't go there; what if we come up on a bear or a cougar or escaped convicts like always happens on TV?"

So the healing medicine of listening to crickets and songbirds and a gurgling stream, the calming effect of watching a pair of mallards swim upstream a few yards and then drift down again, and the neighborly challenge to leave a camp site like we find it or better are declined by the fear of critters more afraid of us than we are of them (with better reason) ... well, not the escaped convicts, but they are of minute incidence and systems exist for tracking them.

The reality, however, is that conflict is a vital element of drama as it has evolved as a human artform. The antagonist can be another person, an animal, the weather, or any combination of circumstances as the protagonist overcomes adversity. Animal trainers can come up with a grizz or gator or wild dog that can scare the heebie jeebies out of folks out on a peaceful outing that turns into a nightmare, just as the script calls for. I have no argument with entertainment, but the impression can grow that the places of beauty and grandeur are dangerous unto themselves. Well, ANY place can be dangerous without basic common sense and caution, but, by and

large, a state or national park is much safer than a comparable urban area, taking traffic and criminal activity and basic things like gas line leaks into consideration.

I'm proud of the State Of Tennessee, at least in this regard. Under a succession of governors of both parties and in cooperation with a variety of environmental organizations, LARGE parcels of land have been added to protected properties that will assure our grandchildren's grandchildren the opportunity to watch mallards work a stream and eagles fly and small mammals scurry across trails from cover to cover. There are relatively small parcels of "old forest" even yet in Davidson County and efforts are under way to protect them from development.

Some may say there's no economic advantage in undeveloped land, but some advantages come without a price tag. My family didn't own the woods and fields I rambled in, but their presence impacted my growing up. And I might add it's a funny feeling to see lumber-size pine trees grow where Dad and I had a garden sixty years ago. A built-in aspect of Creation is protection of the soil. Land in the South that has been "cottoned-out" over the past two centuries goes to grass (usually broom sedge) when cultivation stops, followed by pine seedlings in some areas, hackberry in some, etc, and ultimately hardwood forests, assuming that man-caused damage is not excessive.

Some version of such "self-healing" of the earth exists in most areas of the planet, so it is prudent "self-healing" for humans to preserve natural areas even beyond the concept of urban parks and greenways. Thomas Jefferson predicted, with the overcrowding of Europe as a case in point, that over-population that depletes natural woods and meadows would have dire consequences on our culture. There have always been some who felt that way, but it's encouraging to see the attitude become more prevalent. As in my song, just as the music of the Carter Family was nurtured by the crickets and mockingbirds in the sweet Virginia breeze, we can all expand our capacities for joy and fellowship by a bit of time absorbing God's music from the birds and the breeze. For what it's worth, I can confidently testify to its impact on me. ❖

## Recent Hollow Spots

### **Tom Roady**

For what would have been his ninth Christmas tour with the Skaggs Family, Tom Roady did a nine hour rehearsal with the troupe and got on the bus for Clemson, South Carolina, for the first date. In his bunk, he texted his wife around midnight that he was going to sleep and that he loved her. When Tom didn't respond to the bus pulling in next morning to unload, he was checked on and it was discovered he had passed away. For a man who had been diagnosed in October with cancer, the elite percussionist got every possible bang out of a full, eventful life, succumbing, not to cancer, but to a heart condition. GREENVILLE NEWS staffers Paul Alongi and Anna Simon wrote an on-the-ground piece about the show (with a silent drum set on stage) and the local response that honors honorable people. Most people don't think of drums in regards to Ricky Skaggs, but Tom's creative enhancements were a special touch for the diversity of material on the Christmas show. It's a terribly sad loss for the entire music endeavor, yet let's not cry for Tom; what a gloriously appropriate way to go out.

### **Charlie Douglas**

His hometown obituary referred to him as Doug China and discussed his long and incredibly influential broadcasting career, but I never saw them explain that most of the world knows him as Charlie Douglas. I last talked with Charlie at the funeral for Tex Davis; he had been retired for several years and I did not know he was living in South Mississippi, but he appeared happy and healthy. Country music's debt to Charlie is massive; he would give new acts airplay, which included exposure to truck drivers and night workers, among country music's more enthusiastic demographics. His tenure at WSM, after so many late-night hours from WLW in New Orleans, as an appropriate "attaboy," but the music and the musicians still owe him a debt. The best we can do is just say "Thanks, Charlie."

### **Paul Warren**

When Connie told me about a fog-induced forty-car pile-up with one fatality on Vietnam Veterans Boulevard in Hendersonville, it occurred to me there are too many music-related people in that area for SOMEBODY to not be involved. Shortly we learned the fatality was the 28-year-old grandson of legendary Flatt & Scruggs fiddler Paul Warren, also named Paul Warren. Les Leverett told me he taught Johnny Warren, the respective son and father of the two Pauls, in the twelve-year-old

Sunday School group at Goodlettsville First Baptist Church and has maintained a friendship. After fiddler Paul died, his widow married legendary Curly Sechler, who had also been a member of the Flatt & Scruggs band. "Johnny told me one time," Les chuckled, "that he had two daddies and they were both Foggy Mountain Boys." Young Paul's death is particularly poignant: he was married in October.

### **Dobie Gray**

I haven't seen Dobie in a number of years but was around him a lot in my early PERFORMANCE days. "I want to run a line by you that I wrote today," I told him one night. "Okay, shoot." "There's no way the Supreme Court can integrate a funeral; only love can do that." He let it soak in, then silently smiled with his whole face and hugged my neck. I didn't get to attend his funeral, but I'm sure it was VERY integrated.

### **Barbara Orbison**

I've heard the observation that no star widow has done more to perpetuate her late husband's legacy since Mary Reeves. I met Barbara when I went to interview Roy once; I went to the wrong door and she was very gracious but did not want me to come through her kitchen. So I walked around to the proper door and she was standing there holding it open. I think I was intrigued by the small kitchen garden and assumed that was the way in. Roy walked me to the car when I left and Barbara waved from the kitchen window. Good folks.

### **Jack Pruitt**

Jack played guitar for Marty Robbins for many years, with a period with David Houston during Marty's health problems; his brother, Sammy, was a major player in the Hank Williams story, and he was once married to Jeannie Pruitt, who had songwriting credits before having hit records. He permeates this music's history.

### **Dan "Bea" Spears**

Bea was part of the Willie Nelson Family show from right after Willie's return to Texas and contributed massively to the music, quite famously as one of two instruments on "Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain." Despite his unassuming public demeanor, Joanie Sanders recalls some incredible pickin' sessions with him on the bus during various jaunts. It's sad that he died from exposure on his own property, falling and unable to get help. Hey, Old Farts, take that cell phone EVERYWHERE!!!

### **Lessie Atwood**

The mother of Opry and session pianist Tim Atwood, Lessie became the epitome of what is good about

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*TheBridgeWorks* is issued from Nashville, Tennessee, monthly in a six-page mail version and a cyberversion at <http://www.unclewillamsplace.com>. For one year of the "whole show" on real paper delivered by the nice folks of the USPS, send \$15 to the address in the staff box, with checks payable to Bill Littleton, please. Sample issues are available on request.

the Internet and Facebook during the final several months of her life. Daughter-in-law Roxanne Atwood posted regular updates from the cancer diagnosis on, providing massive inspiration and empathy for folks who had never met Lessie but were connected in some manner with Roxanne, all in addition to Lessie's obviously considerable family. There were a few trips and quite a few hilarious experiences in between the dips of pain and hard days and we were "in the room," so to speak, with many comments reflecting the power of prayer and respect for family cohesion. I had known Roxanne on a professional basis for a number of years, but Facebook has provided a friendship platform that will surely endure, along with many pleasantly poignant memories of Lessie.

#### **Billie Jo Spears**

Billie Jo's list of hits might have been limited, but she understood the power of an international fan base and got more mileage out of the hits than some acts with longer credit lists. When her health declined, she retired quietly back to Texas, yet stayed in touch with "the folks."

#### **Dale Weaver**

In addition to working in Nashville ten years, Dale was a staff guitarist for the Louisiana Hayride, all before devoting thirty years to U.S. Civil Service.

#### **Tim Dean**

Surely less than a year ago, we announced the passing of Tim's twin brother, Tom. They were active as a performing duet for several years circa the late '70s and both pursued other pursuits, both in and not in the music endeavor. Something quite unusual, at least in my experience, was the obituary notice that Tim leaves no relatives, but a lot of friends. Indeed.

#### **Bill Hall**

Although not involved as such in music, Bill Hall was a huge component of the Nashville personality, doing weather as well as gardening and hunting features on WSMV Channel 4 for a long, long time, with his voice capable of convincing you of the dangers of severe weather and calming you at the same time.

#### **Jody Rainwater**

Charlie Johnson got into radio in 1936 and took time out as one of the "few good men" who helped kick Hitler's butt, then came home to North Carolina and to playing music on various radio stations. As per the times, he developed a comedic character called "Little Jody" while with Woody Houser, also playing mandolin and booking the band. In '49, he became the booking agent for Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs; when Cedric Rainwater left the group the following year to join Hank Williams, Charlie not only took over playing and singing bass in addition to booking, he "became" Jody Rainwater. As DJs superceded live bands, Jody became an institution at WSVS in Crewe, Virginia, and a fixture at festivals throughout the region.

#### **Geneva Sullivan**

The wife of country music legend Rollin "Oscar" Sullivan of the Lonzo and Oscar saga, Geneva has been no small part of the legend. Oscar has recently appeared in a Country Family Reunion series and looks healthy and happy; this is a terrible tragedy and he has our prayers.❖

## **A Brief Comment On "The Dream"**

Paul Allen, who teaches music business at MTSU, Belmont, and Cumberland College recently lamented in a TENNESSEAN op ed piece that doing away with local and even regional program directors will further diminish opportunities for aspiring performers, who no longer can get their music played even on their hometown stations. Here is a fascinating quote: "In the first four months of 2011, Neilson estimates 4.7 billion songs were played on U.S. radio to an audience of 280 billion listeners." Obviously, that means there were that many SPINS, to use an old-fashioned term; it would be interesting to know how many actual individual songs that entailed. I'll guess less than a thousand for all genres.❖

## **Pertinent Quotes**

This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth into righteousness, not health, but healing, not being, but becoming, not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. **Martin Luther (via Emily Gibson)**

I'm not really brave. Sometimes I'm scared, but I must like being scared, because I keep putting myself in scary situations. **Cellist YoYo Ma, during his presentation of the Kennedy Center Honors, 2011**

A child is born with a creative spark. If anything can save the planet, it is the creativity that is nurtured and nourished through the arts in the basic curriculum of the schools. **Concert Pianist Lorin Hollander at The Tennessee Arts Academy, 1991**

I'm losing more friends lately, but I'm not getting more used to it. **Jack Blanchard**

I'm thankful to all of those who said "No" to me. Because of them, I did it myself. **Albert Einstein (via Alan Coffey)**

If your hands fit a boat paddle or a baseball bat, they'll fit a broom. **Oscar Neuell "Slim" Littleton ❖**

## Hollowheart

by Emily Gibson

The largest potato I harvested from our garden this year was the size of a small grapefruit — a yellow-fleshed variety with a smooth surface, a rather irregular shape but nonetheless impressive in sheer bulk. It had been waiting on the shelf in the root cellar for just the right dinner this winter, and tonight was the night.

I peeled it and, to help it steam faster, I started to halve and quarter it. I could tell as soon as the knife went through it that something wasn't right. And it wasn't.

This beautiful spud was hollow with brown fleshy mush in the center — not rotten — no odor whatsoever, but internally a defective mess. Gorgeous outside, a shamble inside. There wasn't really enough good potato to even steam up to eat. It was a beauty only skin deep, with no substance within.

Potato hollowheart is an abnormality that occurs when a potato grows too quickly with uneven climate conditions — too much rain, too much fertilizer too quickly. I'm not sure why this potato suffered when the rest of my crop were regular size and all exposed to the same garden soil and weather. I don't fertilize at all, so this was a potato that went awry for reasons of its own.

It is a reminder that the best of the crop are the ones that tend to blend in with the rest — sometimes with scabs that need to be smoothed or peeled off, or a rough surface that requires extra cleaning, or too many eyes, or just a bit on the small side. But once they are cleaned and steamed and prepared, they are sweet and fleshy and buttery without butter. They are nearly perfect despite their plain outward appearance.

I don't want to ever be discovered to have a hollow heart. Give me scabs and scars and wrinkles and puckers. But make my heart full, overflowing and sweet, a joy to be revealed inside a plain and rough outer skin, all scrubbed clean.

*Bill's note: Emily Gibson is a physician, farmer, wife, mother, church pianist, communicator, and good citizen of the universe in Everson, Washington. A prolific blogger, she is "Briarcroft" on Wordpress.com and, to use an old country expression, pack a lunch when you start to browse her archives; it will take a while, and you won't want to leave. Emily is among a number of bright spirits who share with us here; I'm grateful for all. ❖*

## The Roy Rogers Century

It may be presumptuous to designate a previous century to one person, indeed, in a century during which so many people did so many, many things, but RFD-TV is hosting a fun and fitting tribute in that Roger Rogers was born a hundred years ago this year. So some comments are in order.

Indisputably, Hollywood had an enormous impact on American and global culture, the Western movie as a genre had an enormous impact on Hollywood AND the collective culture, and Roy Rogers pretty dang nigh WAS the King Of The Cowboys. I met him twice. The first time was circa 1969; Ben Smathers introduced me to him backstage at the Grand Ole Opry, and Les Leverett got a shot of us standing behind the curtain chatting. Neither Roy nor Les nor I paid any particular attention to the presence of a woman behind us wearing a fashionably short dress that exposed a LOT of leg, but her presence between-if-behind us obviously bothered somebody in the editorial department of THE AMERICAN MUSICIAN, to whom I sent the photo, considering that I had a monthly column therein so a photo of the columnist chatting with Roy Rogers made sense.

And they did run the photo, after razorblading the woman out. The edit was so obvious that it COULD have been perceived that the columnist and the cowboy might not have even been there at the same time. Nobody ever suggested that, and I kept my displeasure to myself, although it wasn't a photo I showed to a lot of people who didn't get the publication.

Some thirty years later, I was part of a press conference RCA hosted for him regarding the project he was doing with Clint Black. "Most of my heroes from childhood who are still with us aren't as healthy as you are," I asked in full sincerity; "what makes the difference?"

He didn't blink and didn't pause. "I've always made a point to stay happy." I'm sure he elaborated on that, maybe something about bouncing back when you get knocked down or focusing on the family instead of fame or whatever, but the comment of making a point to stay happy resonated so that the rest of the press conference is a bit of a blur in my mind.

Roy Rogers doesn't have a corner on celebrity contentment, but my four decades of observing the entertainment endeavor have revealed the need of an effort, of "making a point," rather than letting every whirlwind scatter the senses, along with the elements of happiness. We're not always happy with everything that happens, but those situations can be compared to the difference between weather and climate, the former being the day-by-day fluctuations of the elements while the latter entails long-term general conditions, year after year. I'm grateful to Roy Rogers for bringing that to my attention. A good century it's been, and Happy Trails to us all. ❖

## Who's Where Doing What

**Fred and Marguerite Huff were part of my life before I moved to Nashville**, so it is wonderful that even since Fred's passing, Marguerite has continued her support of this publication, including information that we probably wouldn't get elsewhere. Just before Christmas, for example, she telephoned to let me know that her 94-year-old-neighbor, Ramblin' Tommy Scott, had visited at her home and presented her with a copy of his newest project, a duo endeavor with Curly Sechler, who just turned 92 on Christmas Day, entitled "Bluegrass Old And New And Gospel." Having first recorded during the 1930s and continuing to play dates as "America's Last Real Medicine Show," Tommy has obviously slowed down but keeps on going, as the same can be said for Curly. Interestingly, the day after Marguerite and I talked, an appearance Curly made on the Marty Stuart Show last January was re-aired, demonstrating the solid honesty of the music of the pioneers, ably supported by Marty and the Superlatives, I might add. Tommy and Curly both participated in the Bill Monroe Centennial Celebration in Owensboro September 13, and I suggest that any future opportunity you get to see them is taken; meanwhile, you can find the CD or at least connect with Tommy at *Tommy Scott.com*.

Marguerite also told me she had just heard that Billy Dilworth, quite a North Georgia institution himself, had just come home from the hospital and that Joe Taylor had made arrangements for someone to stay with him in the wake of friend/caregiver Doug Leatherwood's death in the tornado last spring. The restoration of Joe's house is nearly finished, so he will be back home after all these months in an assisted living facility. "Things were really bad for Joe for a while," she noted, "but it looks like he's turned the corner." What a wonderful expression. And what a wonderful lady.

**Little Jimmy Dickens, Johnny Bush, Georgette Jones, and Bobby Lewis are the January 14** lineup for the Llano Country Opry in Llano, Texas, a continuation of a STRONG flow of music from Heart Of Texas Records. For ticket info, call 325-427-5354.

**The Quebe Sisters Band kicked open the New Year with a rousing RFD appearance on Larry's Country Diner**, with a "slow winter hopefully enabling studio time for another CD. How slow? They play Celtic Connections in Glasgow, Scotland January 26 and 27; the February 7 date in Graham, Texas, is already sold out; on February 10 and 11, they perform at the 52nd anniversary of the Chicago Folk Festival; from February 18 to March 2, they tour California, Oregon, and Washington as part of Don't Fence Me In, presented by the National Council For Traditional Arts, they play the Llano Country Opry March 10, a private event in Dallas the 30th, and the Ritz Theatre in Wellington, Texas March

31. There is more, but that's what they call a "slow winter." Three sisters in their early twenties playing triple fiddles and singing vintage-quality three part harmonies with the excellent guitar support of Joey McKenzie and Drew Phelps on upright bass are a unique situation and appear to be here for the long haul, so learn to pronounce their family name: it sounds like Kway-bee. It won't take long to get used to it, I do believe!!!

**Equally intriguing and exciting to me is an upcoming recording project by Cathy Coynes.** I had told people I first heard her when she was nine, singing over-the-top harmony with her parents, Ron and Leona Williams. Well, Cathy's Facebook site gives her date of birth as 1960, so she was closer to SIX when I heard her. We chatted briefly a year or so ago and she mentioned she "was getting back to it" when I asked about her music involvement; indeed, she is, and I WILL let y'all know all I know.

**Thanks to Bill Moyers for info that the George Kaiser Family Foundation has bought the Woody Guthrie archives** — his manuscripts, letters, and journals — and a center is being built in Tulsa to make them available to visitors and scholars, as they have been in New York, but not with the easiest possible access. Our reports have been that the space is pretty cramped. Brother Moyers points out that Woody was generally regarded a radical by Oklahoma's establishment during his lifetime, so moving the material to Oklahoma is significant and highly appropriate.

**Within a similar context, a new book from the Shel Silverstein archives is scheduled**, drawn meticulously from previously unpublished material. Some might deduct that Shel had omitted those poems from earlier volumes because they didn't come up to his standards, but it's more likely they didn't fit the projects at hand. He was very much into "packaging," as in pitching entire albums to folks like Bobby Bare, and he wrote incessantly, so it makes sense that many songs, poems, and drawings that most writers would have pitch individually got left out of specific conceptualizations.

**Unexpected consequences department: Donna Ulisee and her Poor Mountain Band** were recently booked for a corporate event. Covering travel expenses is pretty standard, but providing a private jet to get them there and back home was something of a new twist for this impeccable bluegrass group. Furthermore, Donna got to sit "up front" with the pilot a bit and is fascinated by the idea of taking flying lessons. Quite a functional idea, in fact, except ... well, take a look at her schedule and it becomes a BIG deal!!

**A quick closing note:** this, the December edition, is obviously late for generally recurring reasons, but the plan is to have a January edition BEFORE February 1. It's underway and hopefully not full of obits!! Bill ❖

## The Christmas I Met Franz Gruber and Joseph Mohr

A few basics for this story to make sense: I was nine years old in 1948, in bed with what was then diagnosed as rheumatic fever from November till the following June, and nobody in South Carolina had television. But my family kept the Philco radio in my bedroom (which was actually the living room) and if somebody wanted to hear something on the radio, I got to listen, too, which included the afternoon soap operas Mama would listen to as she ironed or did fingerwork with her sewing or whatever. It also included a prize fight or two if my grandfather was visiting. One of the programs, Mama and I pretty well scheduled our day around -- she would bring my lunch and hers, too, and we'd listen while we ate around midday. Don't remember the name of the program, but it entailed dramatizations of Biblical stories, which is how I came to know a lot about Ruth and David, in particular -- there were LONG series on them -- along with a number of shorter segments, especially at Christmas.

The narrator of this series had a classic radio voice of the day, concise but comfortable, serious but expansive; such a good story teller, in fact, that his telling of the writing of "Silent Night" amounted to a word movie. Remember 1948; the only pictures I had seen of Austria and much of Europe had depicted the destruction and rubble of World War II, mostly at church to encourage contributions to the rebuilding efforts underway. Yet his description of the Austrian village in whose parish church "Silent Night" was first performed at Midnight Mass in 1818 literally transcended space and time. His version of the story involved mice eating holes in the bellows of the church organ, but there have been so many versions I'm not sure of the other details. The organ part stuck maybe because I had attended summer Bible school at a rural church that still had kerosene lamps and a pump organ, which the budding musician in me had looked at closely enough to understand how it worked.

In short, I knew that the young priest Joseph Mohr had written the lyrics and asked local music teacher Franz Gruber to write a melody and guitar accompaniment. Wow, guitar!!! My already-favorite Christmas song had been originally performed with two male voices and a guitar!!! So Franz Gruber quickly joined Merle Travis, Maybelle

Carter, and Punkin Campbell as my favorite guitar players and the priest joined ... well I didn't know at that point who had written "Waltz Of The Wind" ... but I was coming to understand that songs didn't just happen -- people wrote them; my Aunt GeeGee, in fact, was writing a lot of songs, none of which were recorded, but I was on my way to understanding the song and singing and guitar playing process.

All these years later, it doesn't HAVE to be a Christmas Eve, but it can be — it just has to be a cold winter night with at least a few stars and not a lot of wind, and I can take myself "back" to Austria and hear those two accomplished, dedicated gentlemen sing as one plays a guitar. And my fingers itch as I wait to ask if I can hold the guitar.

*Bill Littleton* ❖

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***FIRST CLASS***