

# The spirit of Jack Daniel's

Was it charming flapdoodle or the real thing?

By Tom Bentley

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**I**t seems that truth is more than one breed of animal. For instance, there's your factual truths and your spiritual truths.

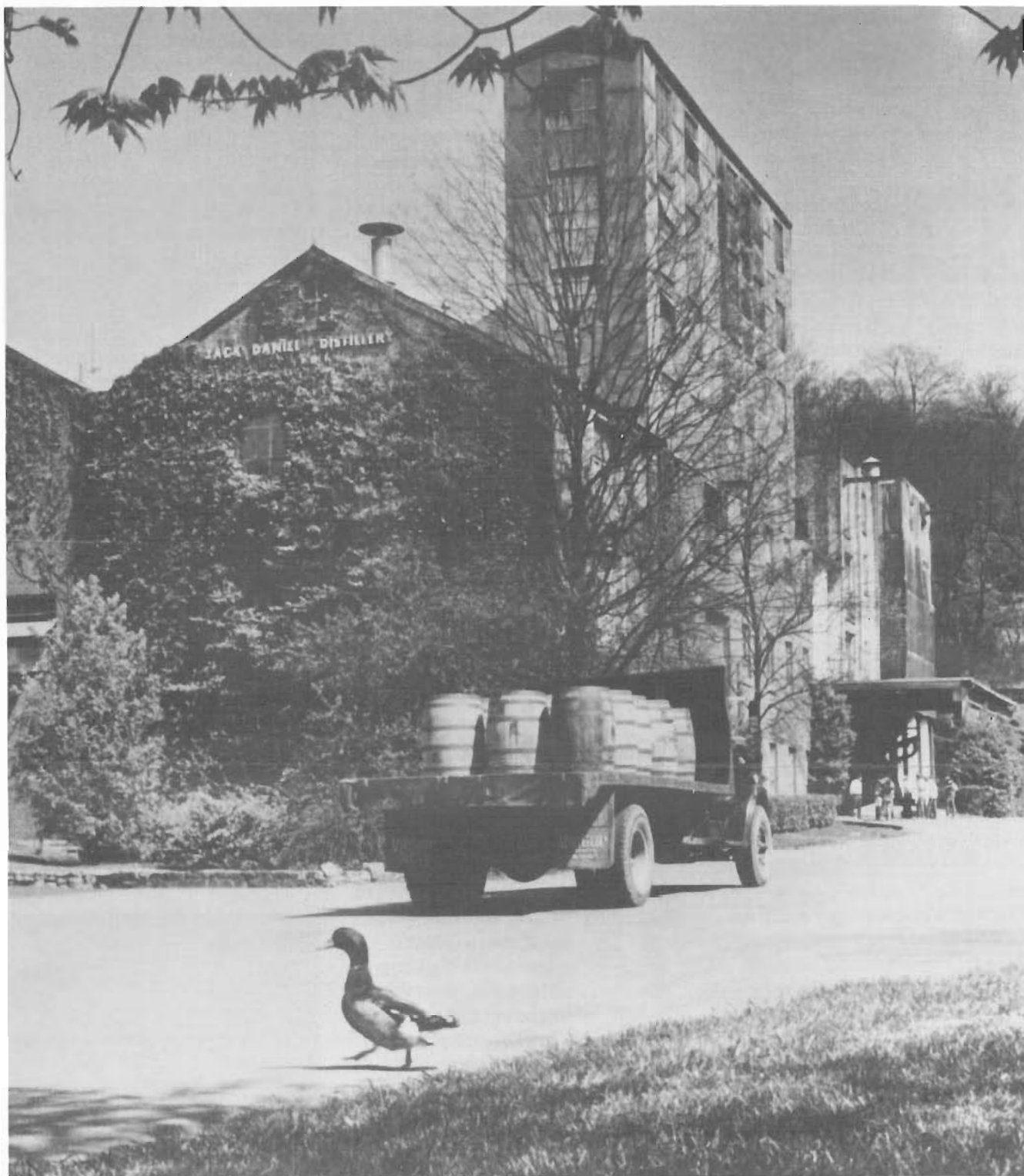
If my grandmother said that Smucker's jam kept her kids from getting the mumps and would keep my kids from getting the mumps, that's a spiritual truth of my grandmother's that no Xeroxes from the **New England Journal of Medicine** are going to dissuade. I have received such a body of spiritual truth from the Jack Daniel's Distillery.

I have a thick sheaf of papers and odd items that represent a 13-year correspondence with the good people in and around the Jack Daniel's Distillery at Lynchburg, Tenn. In the fall of 1976, when I was living in Glen Ellen, I wrote a brief inquiry asking for a booklet of historical information about Jack Daniel's, written by a Garland Dusenberry.

My letter was what Mark Twain would call a "stretcher," a bit of exaggeration that tilted the truth as much as I was tilting the glass at the time of its writing. I explained to the distillery folks that I thought that old Jack's product was a balm for just about any ailment: a topical ointment for aches and pains, a zesty substitute for toothpaste—a letter written in a spirit as innocent of guile as of sense. I promptly forgot all about it.

But in November I received the first of many dispatches from Lynchburg, a cordial letter from Mr. Joe E. Swing (on the handsomest, gilt-embellished pictorial letterhead I'd ever seen) regretfully announcing a shortage of Mr. Dusenberry's booklets and inviting me to stop by Lynchburg and visit—"We'd consider it a real pleasure to show you around."

Fair enough, I thought. My only contact with Jack Daniel's for the next six weeks was as a personal medicament, and I was quite sur-



*It's the real thing.*

prised to receive a package from Lynchburg containing six glasses embossed with a silhouette of the estimable Mr. Daniel and a bit of folk wisdom on each one: "May your sons be brave, your daughters marriageable, your wife loving and kinfolk rich." The letter accompanying the glasses explained that they were "Tennessee Sippers," with the elaboration that, "It's a glass, Mr. Bentley, especially designed for sipping."

I thought that was right gentlemanly of the folks out in Lynchburg, and I wrote back a while later to tell them so. I must

confess that each one of those glasses perished in service, but not before deliverance of many rounds of the succor that only sour mash provides.

About a year later, I received a letter from the distillery informing me that, upon Mr. Joe E. Swing's recommendation, I had been accepted into membership with the Tennessee Squire Association, an organization recognizing friends of the distillery.

As the letter stated, "There certainly is no obligation on your part, nor will there be any attempt made by our company to use your

good name in any way. It is just our feeling, Mr. Bentley, that too little time is spent in this day and age enjoying the friendship of others."

With the letter was a deed to Plot No. 4979f in "The Hollow" in Moore County, Tenn., for consideration of my "avowed and generously expressed loyalty and devotion for Jack Daniel's Charcoal Mellowed Whiskey," this property belonging to me, "and to the heirs and assigns of such party forever."

Now, I was raised in Los Angeles, so I'm probably more of a country boy than Donald Trump, but not much more. My mind

*"I would estimate should you wish to establish a family cemetery plot on this property, it might be wise to instruct burial feet first."*

struggled to interpret what a "hollow" might be and could only come up with something like a shady alleyway. And here, in one fell swoop, I had become landed gentry in Tennessee.

At the time, I took this as so much marketing flapdoodle. Charming flapdoodle, to be sure, but flapdoodle all the same. I soon found out that being a landowner in Tennessee provokes a variety of compelling attentions and requires exacting judgment.

After I had thanked the association, I received over time a spate of letters from the various business concerns and personages in Lynchburg. Mr. Clayton Tosh of the Lynchburg Hardware and General Store sent me a planting chart for my land and advised me as to his supplies of hoes and rakes.

A couple of months later, Mr. Tosh informed me that my land was "sort of grown up with horseweed worms for fishing." He extended the offer of showing me his "fishing place" next time I was "down here and want to go fishing." Naturally, I felt I had come out well in this contract, and I gave Mr. Tosh the rights to those precious horseweed worms in perpetuity.

Not long after, I was alarmed when I received a notice from Ms. Joan Nolen, the county executive of Moore County, that my 1978 taxes had come due on Plot No. 4979f, but not two days later, Mr. Graddy Richard, then secretary-treasurer of the Tennessee Squire Association, notified me that the Association had taken care of my taxes, and he sent me a receipt breaking down the various assessments, such as "Library...05," and the sum total: \$2.30.

Not having owned land before, I was ignorant of the particulars, but that seemed a tad modest for a truly sumptuous parcel, so I thanked Mr. Richard for his help and discreetly inquired as to the size of my estate. In his words, "I would estimate should you wish to establish a family cemetery plot on this property, it might be wise to instruct burial feet first."

At this point, I'd been corresponding with the varied entities associated with the distillery for nearly three years, and I still couldn't decide if it all was an elaborate joke, a stroke of marketing genius, the real thing, or a combi-

nation of all these possibilities. I had documents that looked real but seemed to be founded on absurd premises. Well, things just got more and more interesting.

In late 1979, Mr. Richard sent me a hardbound collection of photographs of Tennessee hill country with some passages of "lyric poetry" beside each one, as a plaintive caption of sorts. Some of the photographs were lovely indeed, but that poetry—ye gods, it was thicker than syrup made from coal, and every photograph of the setting sun was weighted down with adjectives so heavy that sun would never rise again.

Of course, I penned my thanks to Mr. Richard for his largess in sharing the local color with me. Soon thereafter I was sent a record of "authentic ethnic folk songs indigenous to our hill country"—supernatural ululations accompanied by a hellishly lonely untuned guitar. Here was a cultural boundary I could not bridge.

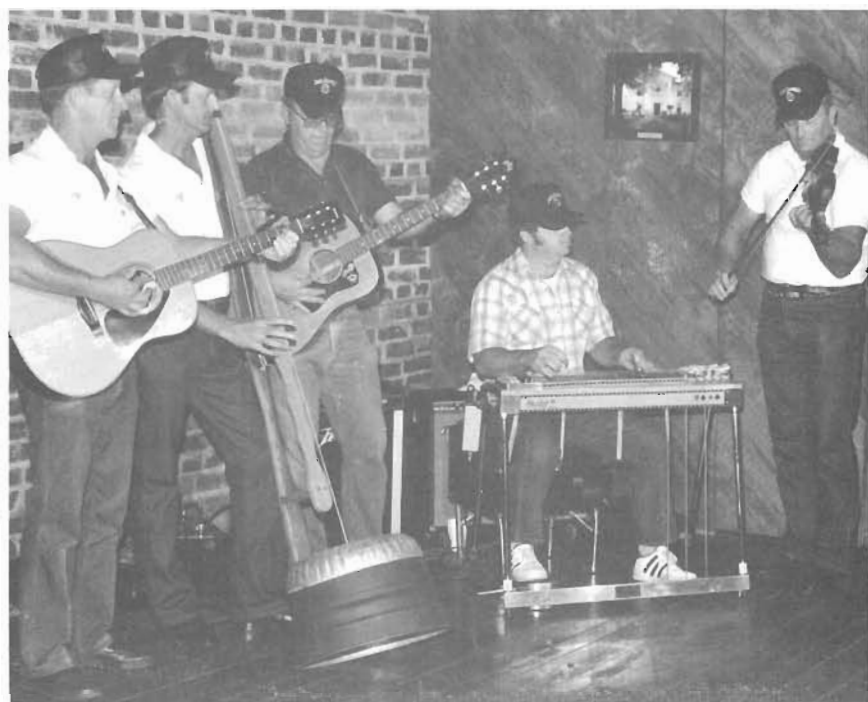
I was a touch worried about these developments in my relationship with Mr. Richard. After I had duly thanked him for the voices from Lucifer's grotto, an H. R. Milsap, from the Moore Farmer's Co-op, sent me a gnarled twist of fibrous bark that he said was "Moore County tobacco twist from this year's crop. This is one of the finest flavored chewing tobaccos available." Let me declare right now that Tennessee men who chew Moore County's finest are men. I would rather listen to a 24-hour marathon of indigenous ethnic music than even smell that stuff.

I began to suspect that Mr. Richard and his confederates had it in for me.

In the course of several years I received:

- A small bag of black-eyed peas in late December 1980, because "all of us believe that black-eyed peas and hog jowl eaten on New Year's Day assure one of good luck during the coming year."

- A buckeye that "came from a tree located near the northeast corner of your plot No. 4979f. The old-timers in the area carry a buckeye in their pockets. They claim it's more potent than the left foot of a graveyard rabbit." (This from Lamont Weaver, on the letterhead of the Lynchburg Coonhunter's Club, who later sent me a picture of all the boys in their hunting



*Pickin' and grinnin', Jack Daniel's style.*

regalia and invited me there for the annual hunt.)

- A genuine "Moore County 'relaxer,' " a lovely little polished stone for rubbing "that often does a better job than one of those drug store tranquilizers."

- A small bag of sassafras root for making "sassafras tea for thinning out the blood, or for fighting off that old springtime lethargy."

The gifts and letters followed my moves around Sonoma County, from Glen Ellen to Camp Meeker to Sebastopol, then up to Seattle and back down to Santa Cruz. I received advice about the best time to pick pokeberry shoots on my property, got a chemical analysis of my soil, was invited to the Frontier Days Celebration and was asked my opinion on the putting up of a second traffic signal in town ("Well, now there's talk of getting parking meters around the square!")

I was advised of a petition to quash a referendum on making Moore a "wet" county after all these years "dry"; I was informed of a serious outbreak of rabies among foxes in the area (that from Ophelia Brazier of the Moore County Health Department)—I could go on...

My greatest regret about not ever getting out to Lynchburg was not going to Mrs. Mary Bobo's 100th birthday party, July 10, 1981, to which I was invited by Bobby E. Murray, mayor of Lynchburg and publisher of the Moore County

News, who wrote of Mrs. Bobo that "she is the nice lady who lives in the two-story white house right down the street from the County Building right across the street from Lawrence Waggoner's house. She, Mrs. Mary that is, has been operating a boarding house there since 1908, and she puts out a fine noon meal, as a lot of us around here can vouch for."

May you live forever, Mrs. Mary.

It's been slightly less than a year since I received my last communique from The Hollow (something from the League of Women Voters about a local issue), and I'm a bit anxious, because that's too long of a time for talk between friends.

I spent a while trying to analyze if the people at the distillery have concocted the most elaborate marketing scheme in history or if there really is something akin to innocence and good fellowship left in our culture.

But spiritual truths being what they are, it really doesn't matter if this was cooked up by some simpering MBA from Princeton; it doesn't matter at all, because the community, the experience rendered, exists as a spiritual truth. If your eye is clear in the reading, you know that the Snopeses in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County exist, just as I know that Mrs. Mary Bobo exists—I can feel her presence.

*Tom Bentley is a San Francisco free-lance writer who likes his Jack Daniel's neat.*