The spirit of Jack Daniel's

Was it charming flapdoodle or the real thing?

By Tom Bentley


It seems that truth is more than one breed of animal. For instance, there's factual truth and your spiritual truths.

If my grandmother said that Smacker'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. No scientists from the New England Journal of Medicine are going to dissuade me. 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 old Jack's product was a balm for just about any ailment: a topical ointment for aches and pains, a testy 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, gift-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."

Sure enough, I thought. My only contact with Jack Daniel's for the next six weeks was as a personal medicament, and I was quite surprised 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 generously 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 delivery 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. 4976 in "The Hollow" in Moore County, Tenn., for consideration of my "wavedly 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
struggled to interpret what a "holow" might be and could only come up with something like a shabby alleyway. And here, in one fell swoop, I had become landowner in Tennessee.

Charming flipdoodle, to be sure, but flipdoodle 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 personalities in Lynchburg, Mr. Clayton Toch of the Lynchburg Hardware and Gentile of the competing plumbing chart for my land and advised me as to his supplies of hoes and rakes.

A couple of months later, Mr. Toch informed me that my land was "sort of grown up with horse-wound worms for fishing." He extended the offer of the advice of 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. Toch the rights to those precious horse-wound worms in perpetuity.

Not long after, I was alarmed when I received a notice from Mr. Joan Nolan, the county executive of Moore Country, that my 1978 taxes had come due on Plot No. 4979, but not two days later, Mr. Graddly Richard, then secretary-treasurer of the Tennessee Square Association, notified me that the Association had taken care of my taxes, and he sent me a receipt breaking down the various payments, such as "Library...05," and the sum total: $20.00.

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 combination of all of 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 plainspoken caption of sorts. Some of the photographs were lovely indeed, but that poetry—yes 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 melodious accompaniment by a hellishly lovely 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 dutifully thanked him for the voices from Lucifer's grotto, an H. R. Milsep, from the Moore Farmer's Co-op, sent me a grained twist of fibrous flax 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 Country'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 big red eaten on New Year's Day assure one good luck during the coming year."
- A buckle that "came from a tree near the northeast corner of your plot No. 4979. The old-timers in the area carry a buckle in their pockets. They claim it's more potent than the left foot of a graveyard rabbit." (This from Lamont Wender, on the letterhead of the Lynchburg Coonhunter's Club, who later sent me a picture of all the boys in their hunting regalia and invited me there for the annual hunt.)
- A genuine "Moore County recliner," a lovely little polished stone for rubbing "that often does a better job than one of those drug store tranquilizers."
- A small bag of sassafas root for making "sassafras tea for thinning out the blood, or for fighting off 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 pinkelberry shots 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 "dry" county after all these years "dry." I was informed of a serious outbreak of rabies among foxes in the area (that from Ogilvie Besler 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 18th 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 Waggener'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 communiqué 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, they 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 Shoppes in Faulkner's Yoknapatwpha Country exist, just as I know that Mrs. Mary Bobo exists—I can feel her presence.

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