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Who Said Western Kentucky People Were Illiterate?

Because my last Athenaeum Society paper entitled "The Bluenoses vs. Bubba" was so warmly received, I decided to write a sequel detailing further encroachment on religious expression by the agnostic-intellectual elite in the Public Square. It would therefore be entitled "Bubba vs. the Bluenoses". Not wishing to disappoint those members who so graciously commented on my first paper but still feeling a little apprehensive about the propriety of such a step, I drove to downtown Crofton to consult with our honored secretary at his Apothecary. When I broached the subject matter of my proposed paper he sustained an acute cholinergic reaction characterized by pallor, diaphoresis, aphasia, and trembling, followed by an adrenergic rebound with a livid red color, gasping speech and signs of imminent collapse. Fearing he had aspirated a quid of North Christian chewing tobacco, I immediately performed a Heimlich maneuver and left as soon as possible. Sometimes actions speak louder than words so I decided to abort my magnum opus and avoid controversial issues of the day. Now by definition, the Athenaeum Society is a literary club and despite occasional lapses into such subject matter as constructing rabbit traps, travelogues extolling the virtues of the Bolshoi Ballet and chicken racing, members have generally adhered to a literary genre in their papers. The late Gladstone Major once recited 30 minutes of original poetry and our beloved secretary Dr. Leslie Crane, was a master at detailing minutes of the previous months session, even receiving an ovation for his word usage and perspicuity in distilling the essence of the presentations in a more coherent and concise manner than in which they were originally given.

Thus far, having said nothing in my introduction, lets do more of the same. In our den at home stands an old wooden desk originally built in 1840 and rescued from a barn in Graves County about 60 years ago by my father. When Dad died in 1978 we gained possession. A large drawer below the desk top was bulging with newspapers, ledgers, old letters, paper clips, rubber bands, etc. At the bottom was a large yellow envelope which contained a Special Edition honoring the Sesquicentennial of the Jackson's Purchase compiled by the Jackson Purchase Historical Society and published by the Mayfield Messenger. Perusing the yellowed pages I encountered a couple of literary figures who would appear to be good subjects for a paper. One was very familiar, Irvin S. Cobb, favorite son of Paducah, while the other, George Bingham, I was heretofore unfamiliar with. With these two bookends I began compiling information on several other

literary personages to support my thesis that West Kentuckians are not illiterate and have indeed made significant contributions in the fields of literary composition and criticism.

To the uninitiated, The Jackson's Purchase area of far Western Kentucky and Western Tennessee is bounded by the Tennessee River on the East, Ohio River on the North, Mississippi River on the West and 35th parallel to the south. Owned by the Chickasaw Indians, it was purchased in 1818 for the United States by Gen. Andrew Jackson and Isaac Shelby after four months of intense negotiation with a purchase price of \$ 300,000 to be paid over a fifteen year period. There were a few emoluments for the signing including \$25 to James Wells for loss of saddle in service for the Country, and \$ 1029 to half-breed Chief James Colbert a sum reportedly stolen from him in Baltimore, not to mention an unspecified amount to the Chiefs who had signed the treaty. The US Senate ratified the treaty in January 1819 and it was duly signed by President James Monroe but the exact boundary line between Kentucky and Tennessee was disputed despite several surveys and wasn't agreed to until 1860. I believe one of our members presented a paper about locating some of the original stone markers. For a brief time, the area was included in Christian County but in 1821, the Kentucky Legislature approved Hickman County as an entity followed by Calloway County in 1822, and eventually eight counties. The Indians moved out and settlers streamed through Cumberland gap from Virginia and North Carolina but always maintained their southern identity including a 90% allegiance to the South in the Civil War. Land was available at 12 ½ cents an acre and the loess soil was ideal for raising tobacco. The area was isolated from the rest of the State and not until the 1930's when bridges were built across the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers and Kentucky Dam constructed, did the Purchase really open up.

Having discussed the historical and geographical features of the area, we will cut to the chase. Now who was George Bingham? He was not the 19th Century artist who like Thomas Hart Benton , Frederick Remington, George Catlin and Charles Russell portrayed the American frontier in paintings. Neither was he the would-be 7th Earl of Lucan whose father, the 6th Earl bludgeoned the family Nanny and then pulled a disappearing act. Parliament refused to recognize his claim to the peerage because there was no proof of his father's death. No, our George Bingham was a newspaper man and writer, born in nearby Wallonia in Trigg county in 1880. His newspaper career started at age 10 when he stood on a box and set type in a galley in Eddyville, but the family soon moved to Mayfield where he later worked for a newspaper and around age sixteen, in a rush of whimsy, created a rural Kentucky town by the name of Hogwallow populated with colorful characters whose exploits were described in paragraphs and carried by two Mayfield papers. In 1905, Bingham started publishing an eight-page weekly paper called the "Hogwallow Kentuckian" and on the back page was a map of Hogwallow and environs including Tickville, Calf Ribs, Dog Hill, Musket

Ridge, Rye Straw, the Wild Onion Schoolhouse, the moonshine still and Thunderation. Eventually readers in 35 states followed the antics of the locals with names like Raz Barlow, Yam Sims, Tobe Mosley, Dock Hocks, Slim Pickens and the Postmaster, while the ladies named Fruzzie Alsop, Fizzie Dillard, Gondola Henstep, Agnesia Flinders, and Cordelia Hellwanger regularly graced the pages. Although the Kentuckian was discontinued after five years, Bingham's paragraphs were syndicated and appeared in over 200 papers throughout the country including the Louisville Times under the title of Dog Hill Paragraphs. A sampling of the paragraphs follow:

Slim Pickens heard a noise at the door night before last but was too sleepy and tired to get up and see what it was. After it ceased he got to thinkin' that it might have been opportunity.

Sile Kildew went to the public speaking at Bounding Billows night before last. He had one ear stuffed with cotton and just heard one side of the question.

The Dog Hill Church bell that came up missing a few days ago has been noticed on one of the cows owned by Washington Hocks.

Dock Hocks had a chill the other day. This is the first chill seen in the vicinity this season so Dock may be considered to be one of our most progressive citizens.

The Rye Straw storekeeper set a mouse trap in the cracker box - and caught Raz Barlow.

Old Man Kildew has been a widower for six months and was observed at Church last Sunday with his whiskers dyed.

George was also a sought-after speaker in the South with an unusual style. He had a low voice and slow cadence but kept the audience on edge awaiting the punch line as he went from story to story. He continued in the Newspaper business in Mayfield until his death in 1938, his legacy long forgotten but he entertained a lot of readers with the exploits of the Hogwallow community. Now I wonder if perhaps Al Capp got the idea for his cartoon strip based on imaginary characters in the rural setting of Dogpatch, Kentucky, from Bingham. Our older members can recall the comic strip featuring Lil' Abner, Mammy and Pappy Yokum, Daisy May Scragg, Moonbeam McSwine, Earthquake McGoon, Capn. Eddie Ricketyback, Senator Jack S. Phogbound, Marrying Sam, Sadie Hawkins, Evil Eye Fleegle, General Bull Moose, Fearless Fosdick and those enterprising moonshiners Lonesome Polecat and Hairless Joe who home-distilled Kickapoo joy juice.

Our next subject, Gene Graham, grew up in Murray and graduated from Murray

State in 1948 after having served as a Navy pilot during WWII. He joined the staff of the Nashville Tennessean as a writer and cartoonist, working with John Seigenthaler and others and in 1962 was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Journalism by exposing a secret deal between John L. Lewis, President of the UMW and Big Coal, to the detriment of the miners. Gene later taught at the University of Illinois and at Middle Tennessee State where he organized a Multi-media Journalism Program, but later died of a brain tumor at age 61.

Bobbie Ann Mason, born in 1940, was raised on a Dairy Farm near Mayfield and after graduating from UK wrote for movie magazines several years before writing short stories in her late 30's. She won the Hemingway Award for "Shiloh and Other Stories" in 1983, wrote four novels, a biography of Elvis Presley, and had a Country-Western song named for her. A well-known woman's writer, she earned a Doctorate in Literature from Uconn and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Also, she was a writer-in-residence at UK and I believe has retired and lives in Graves County somewhere.

Some of you may recall books entitled "The Gabriel Horn" and "Daniel Boone Kissed me". The author, Felix Holt was a Murray native and although I never had the opportunity to meet him in person often visited his father, Duncan Holt with my father. Duncan was a very intelligent man, well read, and could converse on almost any subject. He also held the distinction being Calloway County's only known Atheist. Felix started his career as a cartoonist for Stars and Stripes in France during World War I, before working as a reporter for newspapers in Chicago for whom he covered the Scopes Monkey Trial and other events. Moving to Detroit, he reported for the Detroit Times in the late 1920's before shifting to Radio where he became the chief script writer for the Lone Ranger serial. Some of the antiques in our Society may remember gathering around an old AM Majestic Radio to hear the introductory strains of the William Tell Overture as each 30 minute episode opened and later closed with the Ranger yelling Hi Yo Silver, as he and Tonto rode off. Holt's first novel "The Gabriel Horn" was published in 1951 and the story line closely paralleled the experiences of our family in moving through the Cumberland Gap into Western Kentucky in the 1800's. It was made into a movie entitled "The Kentuckian" with Burt Lancaster playing the lead role in 1955. "Daniel Boone Kissed Me" was printed in 1954, shortly before his death.

John Mack Carter was not an author but a very successful Editor of ladies magazines in New York City, first with Ladies Home Journal and later for Good Housekeeping. A native of Murray we kidded him about celebrating a birthday only every four years since he and twin sister Carolyn were born on February 29, 1928. They lived on Olive Street and his mother was my High School English teacher, and Senior Class sponsor, against her better wishes. We stayed in the

same cabin at Boy Scout Camp one summer with other members of Troop 45 and one night were subject to disciplinary action. When the counselors came to make sure all campers were in bed after taps, moving from bunk to bunk with a flashlight, one noticed several oblong brown objects on the floor closely resembling feces. "Good gosh, who did that?" he asked. For the next two hours we sat in the Indian Council ring awaiting a confession from the guilty party. Finally, Murphy allowed that he had might have made one of them and since the hour was late and the coals turned to ashes we were adjured to never ever allow that to happen again. I might add that neither John Mack nor I were guilty.

Instead of matriculating to Murray state, John studied Journalism at the University of Missouri, one of the outstanding schools in the country for that major, and was hired by Curtis Publishing Company where he moved up the ladder. Success never went to his head and at 84, he is still married to his High School Sweetheart, Sharon. He did endure one unpleasant episode at Good Housekeeping when about 100 militant Valkyries invaded his office stridently demanding a Pro- active stance for Women's Lib, and chastened him for not having more women on his editorial staff. He remained calm, made a minor concession or two, and they were disappointed because he didn't lose his cool.

Murray produced a luminary in the field of literary criticism named Cleanth Brooks, son of a Methodist Minister. Born in 1906, he graduated from Vanderbilt in 1928, followed by an MA from Tulane, and was a Rhodes Scholar at Exeter college, Oxford. At Vandy, he became a close friend of Robert Penn Warren, came into contact with the Southern Agrarian movement, and was a peripheral member of the famed Fugitive Poets consisting of John Crowe Ransom, Alan Tate, Donald Davidson and Warren. From 1932 until 1947 Cleanth taught at LSU and with Warren co-authored "Understanding Poetry" a hallmark of the New Critical movement which revolutionized the teaching of poetry in American colleges and universities. From 1947 until retirement in 1975 he was Professor of English at Yale, wrote a score of books and articles and was visiting professor at several Universities. That's not a bad resume for a boy from Calloway County.

To the historians in our Club, the name Forrest C. Pogue may sound familiar. As the author of the four volume definitive biography of General George C. Marshall. he was a front-line historian during WWII in Europe and a pioneer in Oral History techniques. Pogue graduated from Murray State at age 19 and after earning a Masters from UK, returned to Murray to teach. A native of Frances in Crittenden County, he was a close friend of the slightly eccentric professor, Dr. C. S. Lowry, and seemed to spend a lot of time at the Lowry home where I became acquainted with him. He and fellow Historian Stephen Ambrose had high respect for one another, and Ambrose stopped in to visit Pogue in Murray in later years. Now I literally walked in Pogue's shoes. As an usher in Ann Lowry's wedding and not owning any black shoes I was able to borrow his for the occasion. The Pogue Library at Murray State was named for him.

One of my favorite newspaper columnists was from Benton, Kentucky and always described it as "the only town where I was born". By now you have probably figured out I am referring to Joe Creason, writer for the Courier-Journal. As a collector of Kentucky tales, he traveled into every county of the state observing local color and collecting tales about the lives and fortunes of ordinary people. After graduating from UK in 1940, he was briefly an editor for papers in Benton and Murray before accepting a position with the Courier in 1941 covering Sports and features. In 1963, he started writing "Joe Creason's Kentucky", probably the most popular column in the paper. Since he solicited stories from his readers, I sent him one which later appeared in his column. A Murray acquaintance drove a daily truck route to Paducah for years. One morning under a slight alcoholic cloud he and the train collided at the NC&St.L crossing just north of Benton and was drug down the tracks about 100 yards. Miraculously unhurt, he climbed out of the wreckage, fished out a pocket watch and announced "That darn train was a minute early this morning." Joe loved tennis but one afternoon while playing with a friend experienced a fatal heart attack and died at age 55. Subsequently, the City of Louisville named a Park for him which contains the Louisville Tennis Center with a club house, nine top quality clay courts and stands which hold 400 people. A lot of top tennis stars such as Billie Jean King, Jimmy Connors and others appeared there, as did my cousin Kathy who played in the KHSAA Girls Tennis finals one year. The Barry Bingham family, publishers of the Courier-Journal also endowed a yearly lecture series at UK in his honor.

Now having wandered in and out of the Purchase we will conclude our tour of home-grown Literati by mentioning Paducah's favorite son Irvin S. Cobb. Born in his grandfather's home in Paducah in 1876 he died in New York City in 1944. I was familiar with him as a Humorist but had no idea of the full and varied life he led until preparing this paper, not to mention the volume of his writings. They include over 60 books, 300 Short stories, plays, musical comedies, the script for several Movies, both silent and talkies, as a War Correspondent, and a reporter for Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers. He was also as a much sought-after speaker on the Chautauqua and Lyceum circuits and acted in ten movies. Best known for his humorous tales about rural Kentucky folk in post-Civil War days based on Judge Priest and the black citizens of Paducah, he always considered himself first and foremost a member of the Fourth Estate. Cobb was a wordsmith of the top order as evidenced by this introductory sentence in his 1915 book "The Operation". "Now that the last belated bill for services professionally rendered has been properly paid and receipted, that the memory of the event like the mark of stitches had faded out from a vivid red to a becoming pink shade; now that I pass a display of adhesive tape in a drug store window without flinching - I sit me down to write a little piece about a certain manner - a small thing but all my own - to wit, the operation." It must have struck a familiar chord with the reading population and the booklet sold 500,000 copies. His one-liners also were

gems like this one: A host who made a julep with any whiskey but bourbon would not be above putting a scorpion in a baby's crib. As a strong opponent of Prohibition he penned the following: This here fiery stuff called whiskey, whether white or red is an unlawful offshoot from the Bourbon tribe and among Kentuckians at least is regarded as but an illegitimate orphan of the Royal line, born out of wedlock in the shrine of the moon, left as a foundling on the doorstep of some convenient bootlegger abounding in fusel oil." Cobb started his journalistic career in Paducah rather by necessity when his father died and the family fortunes required a source of income. Dropping out of school at age 16 he hired on at a local newspaper and just three years later became the Editor. His first big break came when a grisly murder in Chicago captured the attention of the public. The perpetrators had escaped the city but in an unusual train of events ended up being captured in Princeton, Ky. Reports of their capture were doubted but reporters from Chicago came south and were on the scene outside the jail, but prohibited from interviewing the suspects. The Tribune reporter missed the train so an APB went out to all their correspondents in the area, but only Cobb responded and headed directly to Princeton where he too was denied access. He had a sudden thought - the Mayor and his father had served in the same Confederate outfit in the Civil War. Being resourceful, He contacted the Mayor who was not only sympathetic but went with him to the jail where another coincidence awaited. The Jailer had served in the CSA also with Cobb's uncle and granted him immediate access to the prisoners who told the whole story including how they evaded the entire Chicago Police Force. With this in mind the young reporter was able to go to a hotel and write furiously before finally securing a telegraph line to Chicago and scooping the big time reporters on the scene. The Morning Edition of the Tribune then blazed the story on Page one under his by-line. Finding the task of editing a newspaper 18 hours a day too strenuous, Cobb joined a Louisville paper and went to Frankfort to cover the Gubernatorial Inauguration of 1900. In a particularly bitter campaign, the Democrats had split and William Taylor, the Republican, actually won a plurality of the votes but William Goebel stole the election in the Kentucky legislature. Tension was high and 1600 armed citizens from Eastern Kentucky had invaded the Capitol. There to cover he events, Cobb was looking out a window overlooking the capitol when he saw Goebel walking across the lawn and collapse after five rifle shots riddled his body. Immediately he ran to the scene and helped carry Goebel to a nearby Hotel and then contacted his paper with the first report of the assassination. Desiring a wider venue, Cobb went to New York to work for Pulitzer at the World and in 1904 was assigned to cover the Russian-Japanese Peace Treaty in Portsmouth, NH sponsored by Teddy Roosevelt, and it earned him high praise and recognition. This lead to an assignment to report the "The Trial of the Century" in New York City, a three-ring circus with a cast of hundreds which lasted for three months in 1906 but ended in a hung-jury. Prominent Architect Stanford White, showgirl and Gibson Girl model Evelyn Nesbit, and half-crazy Millionaire scion Harry Thaw, were principals in a sex

murder triangle. Thaw murdered White in a roof garden of the Madison Square Garden, ironically designed by White, with 1000 people present. Volumes have been written about the surrounding events. Naturally the Courtroom was awash with reporters and Cobb devised a plan to scoop them all. His method was this: assistant one kept him supplied with sharpened pencils and paper as he churned out 12000 words a day in long hand. number two, delivered each sheet to assistant three in the basement of the District Court Building who telephoned the World office where a stenographer wrote out the copy for the News Editor. Thus, the days happenings were published in the Evening Edition before the other reporters had even submitted their stories. Cobb made some rather incisive comments about the participants, both Attorneys and Psychiatric witnesses for both sides. Concerning the Lawyers: The long-winded engaged in flatulent quibbles over legalistic precedent as far removed from the problem involved as it was possible to be. No more charitable to the Shrinks he noted: When a chosen member of one or the other opposing herds of trained alienists (took the witness stand) he responded to his mahouts prodding and put on a display of intricate and very often contradictory verbal acrobatics. By this time he was the highest paid reporter in the land but to escape boredom from the sonorous trial proceedings, started writing a thrice-weekly whimsical piece for the World Magazine page. This launched him into a new direction of humor, and for this he is best known. Early books in addition to "The Operation" include "Oh, well, that's how women are", "Fiddle DD", "Red Likker", "Cobb's Anatomy" and the Judge Priest series. His attempts at stage writing were not successful and even a musical comedy or two didn't click. With the outbreak of World War I The Saturday Evening Post dispatched him to Europe where he first reported from behind German lines in the Flanders and the horrors of War were brought home to him in a compelling way as he saw the dead, mutilated and wounded soldiers and wondered what all this really accomplished. He wrote "Paths of Glory", a book, detailing his experiences. Cobb returned to France in 1918 when the Germans were making their last big offensive with the Allies holding on until the AEF could arrive in sufficient numbers to make a difference. Big Bertha was bombarding Paris from 60 miles away and German warplanes bombed nightly. At Chateau Thierry he saw the U. S. Marines at first hand winning the battle against the Krauts. As a result of his activities he was given the French Legion of Merit and a military march was written in his honor entitled "The War Correspondent".

Some of his stories were made into silent films, opening a new venue and in 1926, at the urging of Samuel Goldwyn and Louis B. Mayer he moved to Hollywood and wrote screen titles for some silent movies and later adapted some stories for the talkies. Cobb also had an acting career, appeared in ten films and was host for the 1935 Academy Awards. Will Rogers became a good friend and I recall seeing them in "Steamboat Round the Bend" competing against one another in a hotly contested steamboat race on the Mississippi. Cobb was married in 1898 to Laura Baker, a southern belle, and they had one daughter

Elizabeth, who was also a writer and penned a biography entitled "My Wayward Parent." Described as rather portly with bushy eyebrows, thick lips and a triple chin, he seemed to always have a cigar in the corner of his mouth and enjoyed a good glass of Kentucky Bourbon. He also was a fierce fighter against the Volstead Act of 1919, and to celebrate repeal in 1933 wrote a recipe book of various concoctions for the Frankfort distillers. Closer to his death in 1944, Cobb wrote his final book entitled "Exit Laughing" in which he disclosed earlier confidential matters which occurred many years earlier but as a mark of honor had never revealed before. His definition of an epitaph was a belated advertisement for a line of goods that has been discontinued and so he wrote detailed arrangements for his funeral to friends at home. He was to be cremated and the ashes scattered under a Dogwood tree in Paducah. "Above all I want no long faces and no show of grief at the burying ground. Kindly observe the final wishes of the undersigned and avoid reading the so-called burial service which I regard as one of the most cruel and paganistic things inherited by our forebears from our pagan ancestors. Perhaps the current pastor of the First Presbyterian Church would consent to read the Twenty-third Psalm which was my mother's favorite in the scriptures since it contains no charnel words, no morbid mouthing about corruption and decay and being mercifully without creed or dogma, carries no threat of eternal hell for those parties we do not like and no direct promise of heaven. His wishes were carried out and in Paducah today there is a 2 x 4 foot footstone with his name inscribed on it marking the spot where the ashes were scattered.

In closing, you may have noticed that I never actually announced a title for this paper. It posed a rhetorical question - "Who said Western Kentucky People are Illiterate?". My answer after expending 62 kilobytes of computer space is "I don't know", but on the basis of the data produced herewith I would conclude they would be wrong, if they ever suggested it.

Sources:

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