

Opinions

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Battle of Duty Ferry, round one

The Police Jury meeting of November 8, 2021, actually accomplished a few worthwhile objectives. It was chaotic and poorly run, but the outcome was much better than it may have looked.

In a packed house, the issue that brought out the crowd was access to public hunting land. Mr. Luther Holloway objected. He seemed to say that those in the room complaining that his group's activities on the road were interfering with the public's ease of access to that public land lacked standing because they were neither property owners nor local residents. The objection fails, of course, because when it comes to places like Boeuf Wildlife Management Area, it's public property. Any citizen is entitled to access for the lawful use of that land merely by complying with the game laws or in some cases buying a pass. In fact, even the requirement of citizenship is doubtful.

A solution to the issue may be near if, as some suggested, a locked gate could be relocat-

ed six tenths of a mile away.

The question is due to be revisited at the next regular meeting of the Police Jury on November, 22, 2021. Same place, same time. (Room 104 of the Harrisonburg Courthouse at 6:00 PM.)

Among two other concerns in connection with all this drama was the notorious ordinance to "adopt roadway regulations". It appears that an ordinance was in view effectively to create a "police force" answering to the Police Jury to do things like hand out tickets to trespassing scoff-laws on Duty Ferry Road. That was tabled. If it is not taken up again at the next meeting it is dead. Good riddance.

The second concern was over what plans there might be for a "Capital Outlay Application" on Duty Ferry Road. The money is intended to "stabilize the Ouachita River bank". Some thought that to be a fool's errand. Not even Police Jury president Harold Sones seemed to be enthusiastic about the idea of trying to hold back the Ouachita, but he assured an inquisitor

By Leo Chappelle

that the money would not be used on private land, and that, yes, the river's relentless career of erosion of its banks would no doubt continue unchecked. But the money is there for the taking. And we shall take it.

The meeting room was packed and chaotic with almost no attempt made to manage the crowd. It was a swirl of confusion and noise at certain points in the meeting. Frankly, I found that far preferable to a six-minutes long formality of rubber stamping with no citizen participation and virtually none from the Police Jury members either. Yes, it could have been done better. Much better in fact. But I'll take the rough and tumble of open debate and participation by the public any day over what we usually get.

Indifference to government is deadly. I don't much care for the Left-wing politics of the Washington Post, but their motto is an important lesson for us all. It is this: "Democracy dies in darkness". At the Police Jury meeting this week, the light shined in Catahoula.

Living in a Dog-Trot House in Catahoula Parish

I grew up in Harrisonburg, in Catahoula Parish, Louisiana. My Dad was raised on a farm in Catahoula Parish and spent his entire life living there either in the big old 'Dog-Trot House' he grew up in, or briefly in Jonesville six miles away, before moving to Harrisonburg about seven miles away.

For those who don't know what a Dog-Trot House is, here's a photo of one that has been 'modernized' with a rusty tin roof to replace the hand-cut wooden shingle roof.

To those of us from that era, we know the Dog-Trot House as one that was built to serve a large rural family's every need, which did not include flattering descriptions such as "Beautiful" and "Grandeur" or described with words like "ornate elegance" or "welcoming opulence" that only the very wealthy could afford.

No, a Dog-Trot house was first and foremost, "Functional" and "Affordable." Anything beyond that had to be easily built and sturdy to the demands of nature and time. There were lots of Dog Trot Houses in the South. Not so many these days.

In our modern world where it is considered 'In Vogue' or "Sheik" to own and live in such a house after, of course, it being extensively and expensively upgraded to modern comforts and tasteful appointments in decor and furnishings. This house would be the envy of all your rich friends.

Walking through it is what is most interesting. For example, that 'tunnel' through the middle was a useful storage area and served to help keep the house cool on hot days and keep dry firewood at the ready during winter. Saddles and harnesses might also be kept there if there was no barn.

My grandparent's house down at Sandy Lake was about the same size as this one but was built up high on stones that were meant to keep the flood-water out; along with all the wild critters that might be seeking some place they could escape the rising water.

The house above looks to be deserted, but at one time there may have been eight or nine 'young-uns' out in the yard, along with chickens, hound dogs and maybe someone's horse tied up to a porch post.

The room on the left, as seen in the photo, was where my grandfather slept. The one on the right was where all the kids slept, sometimes three to a bed. My grandmother slept in a small room between the kid's bedroom and the kitchen at the back

of the house.

Electricity was slow coming to those parts and even then, it may have only been for just one or two very small and very dim light bulbs hanging in the center of the big rooms. Coal oil lamps were more useful because they could be carried to where they were needed, and the power didn't go out when it rained.

There was no TV or radio for listening to music or watching a show, so everyone went to bed early. Besides, if you had time for such foolishness, you had time to whittle out a bowl or axe handle or help in the kitchen or milk the cow or a million other things that always needed doing.

The outdoor toilet would have been out back maybe fifty to seventy-five feet away from the house. We had to go through the chicken yard to get to it. Neither smelled very good and you had to watch your step. An old, well-used, Sears Catalog was about the only thing there besides the toilet itself and that gaud-awful smell. If there was no paper left in the catalog, some shelled corn cobs were a coarse but handy substitute if anyone thought to bring them.

Snakes and flies were a real nuisance too. It was actually very frightening to go to the toilet at night. So 'slop-jar's' (a white porcelain privy bucket with a lid) was usually available at the foot of the bed. Or men might just let go off the porch.

And there was a hand-pump on the back porch for drawing water for everything involving water. Sometimes in the winter we had to break the ice off the pump or pour water in it to get it started. When that water was splashed in your face you woke up fast. There was a white porcelain pan nearby with a chip of lye soap and a hand towel that never saw a washing that I witnessed.

Well before daylight, Grandma always had breakfast ready by the time we were up and about. I was too young to have chores that had to be done. And after I started school, in Harrisonburg, I rarely spent nights in the old place during the winter. But my summers were a mix of me being there on the farm or working in my dad's grocery in Harrisonburg. I still don't know which I liked best.

The old house was on a low ridge about a quarter mile before the land dropped to a much lower swamp-like area near Sandy Lake. From there, it was about four miles through some untamed and easily flooded swamp before reaching the paved Hwy

between Harrisonburg and Manifest.

The parish highway people eventually cleared a right-of-way and built up enough road base for a road. They constructed a bridge over the south part of Sandy Lake to complete the road all the way thorough. They said it would take a pretty good flood to stop traffic on the road. But it did; in fact it flooded so much so that my grandfather and I traveled by boat and outboard motor down the middle of the road to the Manifest highway in 1953. That's for another story to itself.

Besides being convenient in good times, the new road also made it possible during floods to round up and truck a few head of open range cattle at a time to the Manifest hills until the flood threat subsided.

Prior to my dad having a large enough truck to haul maybe ten cows at a time out and back, the only alternative was to flatboat them to high ground. Of course, a flatboat with a few cows had to be pole-pushed through the swamp following a somewhat cleared pathway. It wasn't easy and I was glad I was too young to do anything but watch the men work. And free-range cattle are not the easiest animals to convince that the flatboat was a good thing.

Yes, the whole area flooded a lot. It seemed to happen every year but I can only recall about five times that the flood water really got up to people's houses.

My Grandparent's house was hand-built, of course, with the huge axe-hewed beams set atop 6' high piles of stones held together by clay and moss. It was ancient when I first visited it as a new-born in 1941 and I was too young to understand any of it. But by 1942 I was starting to remember a few things about it because I played under the house where it was dry and cool in the summer.

I never gave any thought at the time that this was primitive living that can only be described by people who lived in similar houses back when just having a house at all, even a shack, was considered good fortune. Never mind that it didn't have screens on the windows, the roof leaked in a lot of places, and that the bath room was a wash tub on the kitchen floor with the water being heated on a wood stove, if at all. The Once a week baths were more than clean enough for any person, especially if you scrubbed with a brush and homemade lye soap.

Of course, the bath water had to be hand pumped from a well on the porch just off



the kitchen. Add to that was the 'pecking order' of who got to bathe first in the water. I never really understood that lineup because my parents moved to town where the regular job was. But all the times I stayed there I was the newest, so I came last in the tub. Or so I'm told. I was even called a sissy at times in school because I tried to look clean all the time. One joke was that I would have to roll in the dirt to look like a country boy.

My Dad grew up there doing the same thing, as did his younger six brothers and sisters. He liked to send me back there during the summer so I could live like he lived. His thinking was that one day I would be a better son and eventually a better man for it. I think it worked.

I'm now 80 going on 100, and I can still remember the smells the house gave off. There were many different odors and they seemed to change according to the weather or the season. Even the rooms smelled different. Not bad smells, just different.

I remember one time I was snooping in a sort of dresser chest my Grandfather had in his big room, when I happened on a pocket knife. I think I was about seven. I asked him what it was because although I had seen pocket knives before, I had never seen one like it. He said it was a Barlow pocket knife and it comes in handy at times.

Then he up and gave it to me. I was thrilled. But I couldn't use it at all until he trained me how to open and close it, use it safely, sharpen it, and keep it cleaned with oil. I cut myself the first time I used it. Not much, but it drew blood and he tied a big rag around my finger that had some coal oil (kerosene) on it. I think I was ashamed that I did something wrong. The big smelly rag didn't help my pride one bit, but by the next day the cut had almost vanished.

Also, after a rain, the house took on a different smell. Kind of like all the odors got wet and they became heavy. It could have

been due to the leaky roof. It was roofed with hand cut wooden shingles. There were gaps so big you could see sunlight during the day and stars at night. When it rained, buckets, pans, cups, and even tin cans were placed according to how much water was leaking in that spot. And beds had to be moved around or a slicker thrown over it to direct the water off to a drip-pan.

I learned early on that you can't fix a roof leak in the rain, and when it's sunny you can't see what needs fixing. I'm not sure anyone thought much about fixing leaks when it wasn't leaking. I know I didn't. Besides, I liked hearing the drops hit the pans.

Most of my aunts and uncles were growing up and moving out before I even started grade school. Eventually, I was the only youngster living there during the summer.

One summer my grandfather asked me to rent his boats on Sandy Lake for him. But that's for another story.

About that time my dad and his siblings all got together and decided to

tear down the old Dog Trot House and use the lumber to build a more modern house their parents could enjoy in their golden years. The new house turned out nice and was very comfortable.

Evenings might find me with my grandfather eating 'parched peanuts (we grew ourselves) in front of the fireplace while my grandmother churned butter in her Daisy Butter Churn or ironed clothes and bed sheets with smoothing irons she kept near the hearth to stay hot. Those were smells I remembered from the old house. It was wonderful. I can smell it now.

I think we all missed the old house. I know I did.

A few years ago I was thinking of what I would spend the money on if I won the lottery. I thought maybe I would find one of them old Dog Trot Houses and pay to fix it up to live comfortably in somewhere far away from noise, people, and floods.

Wishful thinking is not the real thing, but sometimes it can make you break out a smile.

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