Reflections of Biloxi

Prelude

I now realize, looking back on the 60s, that there could have been no better place to spend that decade of my youth, and I wouldn't change a minute of it for the world. I arrived on the Gulf Coast at age eight, and there I lived a boyhood immersed in a wonderland drawn from a palette rich with forests, waterways, and the best of friends, taking it all in until, as a young adult, I headed off to grad school and the world beyond. These several short (and occasionally tongue-in-cheekish) essays recount a handful of favorite memories of places now gone and friends now grown.

For Judson, Randy, Tommy, Carl, Scott, Oren, and Charlie

The Landing

"Popp's Ferry" – some six decades have passed since I heard for the first time those two words spoken together, spoken to name a place, summoned, as it were, from some long ago magical, mythical time, to become associated with this corner of the planet to which I had newly come to spend my childhood, to find childhood friends and, together with them, explore for endless hours the vast and wild (to our mind, at least) woodland which at that time lay between our homes and the bridge whose name to this day reminds of the story of Mr. Popp and his ferry.

One might say it is a great contradiction of young minds that we find, on the one hand, such inquisitiveness, the need to know more about the (seemingly) most unimportant and insignificant of matters and yet they, with this or that other bit of encountered information, question not one thing about it, accepting instead all of it as it is presented, asking for no further explanation. And so it was with my friends and me: we were very much uncurious, unconcerned about the origins of this two worded label, two words that, when spoken one after the other, name this one place, and so questioned no thing about it for these six decades – until now, as a dormant curiosity awakened.

As we would discover, Mr. Popp was one John F. Popp, a Danish immigrant, born in 1835 in Denmark-occupied Prussia, who immigrated to the United States in 1856, landed a clerical job in St. Louis, and worked briefly as a baker in New Orleans. The years leading up to the Civil War found Popp working lumber mills on the Mississippi Gulf Coast where, when war finally broke out, he joined the 20th Mississippi Regiment. The years after the war saw John back in New Orleans where (it is said) he became associated with his future father-in-law William M. Grant, who had been in the lumber business there since 1847. It is thought that when William Grant died some time after 1870 John took over the business.

It is of some interest that the Grants had lived on the Gulf Coast prior to moving to New Orleans in 1847 – their daughter Mary Frances Grant, whom John married in 1866, had been born in the coastal town of Pensacola, Florida in 1845, and we might suppose her family had at least some affinity for coastal life. In fact, when in 1870 the east-west railroad connected New Orleans to Mobile (and passed through Biloxi) we find many New Orleans businessmen built a second home on the Gulf Coast, spending weekends (and often retiring) there. The convenience of train travel to and from coastal towns certainly made the trip easier, and Biloxi is one town that was at this time beginning to gain a reputation as a vacation and retirement destination.

John Popp had begun receiving shipments of lumber products from the vicinity of Biloxi to his New Orleans business by the 1870s, and in 1878 he and his wife acquired 200 acres of land on the north bank of the Biloxi Back Bay from the Holley family, the heirs of Charles Holley, who had himself bought the land from Donald McBean in 1850. On that property, on a bluff overlooking the convergence of the Tchoutacabouffa and Biloxi Rivers, they built the house they would retire to in 1895. In 1883 John also bought land on the south shore of the Back Bay from Calvin Taylor (1806-1893), who had moved to the area from Yazoo City in 1845 to reside in Hansboro and operate a sawmill on the Bayou Bernard, which flows into the bay. It is believed Taylor had already established a ferry that ran from this property to a point near the

Holley family site. Apparently John and Mary acquired this ferry in order to transport family and visitors to and from their estate across the bay, and it is said they never charged a fee to locals for its use.

Mary Frances Popp died in 1910. John sold his property in 1914 and moved back to New Orleans, at which time the ferry was still in operation - it was acquired by Harrison County in 1916. John Popp died a very wealthy man in 1918. The first Popp's Ferry Bridge, built in 1928, replaced the ferry, and the current bridge was built in 1978. A ten acre marshland along the causeway has been preserved by the City of Biloxi as a recreational facility with boardwalks, boat launches, and pavilions with picnic tables. There are now plans to extend the Popp's Ferry bridge nearly a mile to highway 90 on the coast at a cost of an estimated $75 million.

I had lived for seventeen years just six houses away from Popp's Ferry Road, crossed Popp's Ferry Bridge hundreds of times during those years, and even attended fourth grade at Popp's Ferry school, all the while not knowing a thing about Mr. John F. Popp – it may have taken six decades, but at long last the mystery is finally solved – what an interesting fellow he was.

A Forest Lost

It is still there in the deep recesses of childhood memories, a wilderness planted long ago as coastal shores rose from the depths of the Gulf, tucked away in the collective memory of the first peoples who came to these shores to hunt in the forgotten shadows of time, enduringly waiting to be conquered by a brave gang of adventurous explorers, as my young friends and I imagined ourselves to be – that wonderful forest of pine and palmetto stretching northward from the edge of my front yard to Big Lake at the convergence of Bayou Bernard with the Tchoutacabouffa and Biloxi Rivers.

In these present-day times not many youngsters have the opportunity to grow up mere steps from such a forested expanse, and I and my associates at some level understood we were privileged; we knew that with this privilege would (of course) come some sort of obligation, and we took our responsibility quite seriously: we made many explorations, discovering such landmarks as Snake Stream, from which we made every attempt to clear, with our ever present BB Guns, the many Water Moccasins we would find there, the giant old Magnolia Tree atop of which rested a platform raised high and overlooking much of the forest canopy, and so on. We also made many efforts to improve the land, fabricating on our own tree mounted platforms and structures, tree houses built with lumber salvaged from nearby home construction sites – and, on the many-occasioned overnight campouts, with sleeping bags laid directly on the bosom of Mother Earth, we ceremoniously sealed our bond to the Gaia of our own little domain.

As we would in due time come to find out, Mrs. Brown was the owner of our wooded realm - Tommy's father worked for her at the Broadwater Beach Hotel, which she also owned, and it is said she had vowed to never allow our forest to be developed for as long as she would live.

Dorothy Dorsett Brown (1896-1989), the widow of Joe W. Brown (1897-1959), was born in Texas city, Texas. When she married Joe in 1920 the couple lived in Dallas for a time, but by 1930 they had relocated to New Orleans. Joe seems to have made a tremendous amount of money in oil and real estate, and owned a gambling casino (the Jai Alai Club) in New Orleans until it was shut down in 1952.

The Broadwater Beach Hotel on the Gulf of Mexico in west Biloxi was built by Pete Martin Sr. in 1938 and opened in 1939 as an (illegal) gambling casino. Joe Brown acquired the property in 1958, but he died in 1959, leaving Dorothy to further develop the property, and she rose to the occasion in a grand way, making extensive renovations to it, as well as upgrades that include a golf course, an oceanfront marina, and the addition of three swimming pools (in which our gang of adventurers spent many a pleasant summer afternoon).

It seems that with the death of Mrs. Brown in 1989 the hotel property fell into a decade-long state of decline and, after changing ownership several times, the hotel was demolished in 2006. The Pines and Saw Palmettos of our wooded wonderland have also been razed, bulldozed to make way for homes on new streets with such names as Bonne Terra Blvd., Labonne Terre, and Carmargue Lane. Joe and Dorothy are now buried next to one another at Lake Lawn Park

Mausoleum in New Orleans while my friends and I have been left with little more than our childhood memories of it all.

Burnt Bridge

It is a rare child that does not enjoy, with each and every plunge into his or her favorite pool or swimming hole, making as big a splash as possible - but, as is widely known, it is the boys in particular who, being the mischievous little devils they sometimes are, find their delight greatly enhanced when the opportunity to splash some nearby object or (better yet) person is presented. Our neighborhood cabal certainly belonged to the second group, and in the northernmost reaches of the Popp's Ferry Causeway, just where Burnt Bridge spans that 75 foot wide slough, we found the perfect place to hone our splashing skills and seek out unsuspecting victims.

This bridge, sometimes referred to as the Little Popp's Ferry Bridge, was known in days of yore as "Nick Holley's Bridge" at the "Nick Holley's Pass". The Holley family had come to Biloxi from New York and two family members settled just north of this bridge: Nicholas Holley (1810-1870) owned property next to that of his older brother Charles M. Holley (1805-1857), whose heirs in 1878 sold his 200 acres to John Popp for his retirement estate.

In that sale one acre, located on a small bluff overlooking Big Lake, just 75 feet from the shore, had been set aside for the Holley family cemetery. Charles, when he died in 1857, was the first person to be buried there. There are thought to be a total of eight graves at the site including those of Charles as well as E.R. Blackwell (1829-1896), his wife (and Charles Holley's daughter) Burissa Holley Blackwell (1841-1899), and three of their children who died young, Minnie Blackwell (1863-1865), Elan N. Blackwell (1859-1860), and Katie Lee Blackwell (1872-1872). The cemetery, better known today as the "Blackwell Cemetery", can be still found at 2330 Beau Chene Drive, surrounded by the exclusive homes of the Beau Chene Estates, and a stone's throw from our bridge.

During the tenure of Nick Holley the slough was spanned by a simple wooden platform, but we knew nothing of that – by the time of our crew's residency there metal trusses had been brought in to support her, a colossal web of steel triangles reaching up from the pavement toward the heavens, a structure from which we believed we could leap and make a splash anyone would be proud of, a splash that would rise high enough to soak the unwary passengers of passing cars.

Now, as any critic worth his salt could have pointed out, that extra midsection girth, awarded so abundantly to those who have finally reached middle age, had not yet been bestowed on us, being but adolescents at this point, and the splash resulting from our slender bodies would dampen no passing vehicle, no matter how diligently we practiced our cannonballs. But all was not lost, not yet – after careful deliberation we realized we could use one of our number to enhance that splash – it was Randy who bravely volunteered to climb under the bridge and, with a filled bucket of water, douse a passing car when given the proper signal, the confirmation, that is, that a cohort had indeed leapt from the bridge to make the splash that we now knew would not quite reach that car on its own – and so in this manner we were able to "splash" many a passing car that summer, as the Holleys and Blackwells looked on from their perch on the bluff.

From Beauvoir to Edgewater

Most of us, I would venture to say, will remember some moment of grand achievement in our lives, a moment in which we broke through our glass ceiling, a moment which serves as our benchmark and a standard by which all other accomplishments must be measured. One sunny summer afternoon early on in my adolescent years I imagined one such moment was about to take place in my own young life: Scott and I decided to challenge ourselves - we would hike along the one and a half mile stretch of Biloxi's railroad between Beauvoir Drive (Beauvoir, French for "beautiful view", is the name of the last home of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, located along this road) and Eisenhower Road (at the entrance of Edgewater Mall and the now demolished Edgewater Hotel), balanced upon a single rail, for the entire trek making all best efforts to not once tumble off. The fact that our excursion would commence and terminate at historic points of some interest, sites of no small significance in their own right, would add a certain amount of proper dignity to the event.

The Beauvoir Confederate Memorial Cemetery, on the grounds of the Beauvoir home, occupied an area immediately adjacent to our point of departure that day. The home itself, built between 1848 and 1852, initially the summer home of the James Brown family, was sold in 1873 to one Sarah Dorsey, who gave the property the name it still goes by today. In 1877 Sarah rented a cottage on the grounds to Jefferson Davis, and Davis inherited the property when Sarah died two years later. Davis himself died in 1889 (Davis' citizenship, which had been revoked during the rebellion, was not restored until 1978). In 1903 a home for confederate soldiers was established on the property, many of whom found their final resting place in the above mentioned cemetery. Today the Jefferson Davis home and library are open for public viewing.

Our destination was to be the Edgewater Mall and Hotel on the waterfront in west Biloxi. The mall, built in 1963, the first fully enclosed and air conditioned multi-store plaza I had ever heard of, had quickly become a favorite hangout for many of us. Today it hosts over one-hundred stores and services, and has a retail floor area of 843,652 square feet. The mall was built immediately west of the Edgewater Gulf Hotel, which was itself built between 1924 and 1926 (and Scott and I may or may not have snuck into her swimming pool that hot summer afternoon for a celebratory dip at the end of our march). When the Sears store of the mall expanded in 1971 this historic hotel was demolished to make room for it, a victim of changing tastes perhaps, and a reminder of just how transient historic landmarks can be. As for Scott and me, we were both quite elated to have made it safely to our terminus without once stumbling from our respective rails, our victory forever sealed in the chronicles of our lives.

In the Shadow of a Lighthouse

I learned halfway through my teenage years that, if one can present the case with sufficient skill and a bit of feigned certitude, a thing wholly imagined might be convincingly presented as real, that an audience could be led to believe, almost, they see as real that which is, in fact, not.

In those years a frontage drive ran along the seawall on the south side of highway 90 between the Biloxi lighthouse and the old Buena Vista Hotel, and I knew I could expect to find a number of my friends there on any given summer's evening. One special night Judson and I, having decided to toss a Frisbee back and forth between us for a while, took our shoes and socks off and strode out onto the dimly lit beach, of a mind to do just that, and we were not going to let the fact we had no Frisbee stop us.

Now, while we must all surely agree that a degree of expertise would be needed to launch a Freebee some distance into the waiting clutches of a colleague, it might not be as clear that there is also a great degree of expertise and confidence necessary to launch, and successfully catch, a Frisbee that has been only imagined. Certainly, on that evening at least, Jud and I showed ourselves to possess that necessary great degree of expertise in abundance – flashes of light from some distant lamppost or streetlight would at intervals be reflected off beach sand kicked high into the air as our bodies catapulted, time and time again, into that air to intercept our imagined missile, and an adoring (albeit small) audience soon gathered to witness, and applaud, the exhibition.

This event took place not far from the water's edge and but a stone's throw from Biloxi's lighthouse. Built in Baltimore in 1848, this landmark is today just a short way west of the Beau Rivage Resort and Casino and the I-110 loop, the only United States lighthouse to stand in the middle of a highway (Hwy. 90). Inside this 65 foot beacon we find a 57 step spiral staircase topped by an eight rung ladder and a trapdoor which opens onto the light room. It was the future president of the confederate states, Jefferson Davis, who, in 1847, as a Mississippi representative, sponsored legislation to fund the construction of the lighthouse.

There have been a half dozen "keepers" of this monument over the course of her first century of service (half of them women!): Marcellus P. Howard (1848-1854), Mary Reynolds (1854-1866), Perry Youngbans (1866-1867), Maria Youngbans (1867-1918), Miranda Youngbans (1918-1929), and Joseph Oliver (1937-1940). The last remaining of the twelve lighthouses that originally populated the Mississippi Gulf Coast, this historic treasure was deeded to the City of Biloxi in 1968 and eventually opened for public tours. She was added to the National Registry of Historic Places in 1918.

A short stroll east along the beach from the lighthouse and our imagined Frisbee happening one would at that time find the two-storied 200 room Buena Vista Hotel, which had first opened almost a half century before (July 4, 1924). In 1938, following the hard depression era years, James Love Jr. acquired the then struggling hotel. With the addition of the 1500 seat "Hurricane Room" as well as the cocktail and dancing hall he called the "Marine Room", Love began to attract a new clientele, groups in need of convention accommodations, and thus turned

the enterprise around. In 1958 Love built a two story, 160 room motel-style addition beachside with a 6000 square foot swimming pool, and things were looking up. Unfortunately, a 1969 hurricane named Camille brought an end to all that.

The Love family sold the property in 1971, two years after Hurricane Camille hit, and, though the opening of the Biloxi Belle Casino on the premises sparked some small hope for a possible comeback, it was, sadly, not to be – the hotel was demolished in 1993. Today a parking lot for the Beau Rivage Casino (built in 1999) occupies the paved-over grounds of the 1958 addition and the MGM Baseball Park (built in 2015) sits on the site of the original hotel. We can, however, take a bit of solace in knowing, more than a half century after our "imagined Frisbee" affair, the lighthouse still stands to mark the place.

Ship Island

Weary souls might be excused for seeking solace in the deep stillness of night, hoping to find consolation in her calm serenity, and expecting comfort in her noiseless quietude; yet we, if we listen intently for a time, may come to know our supposed silence is seldom completely silent after all – rather, it is invaded from every quartet by entities who refuse to submit to the absoluteness a complete silence would demand, entities who in their many forms do object with immutable music, a narrative which can be heard by we who listen, still and patient, as a story is told.

When I was still quite young my family owned a boat, a twenty-our foot "cabin cruiser" (as they called it) that slept four, and we took many an overnight excursion from Biloxi to Ship Island, one of several barrier islands about twelve miles offshore. In the darkness of post-dinner hours my parents would tuck my little sister in for the night and set out to "gig" for flounder in the shallows, leaving me to keep watch in the wordless dark, and in that deep stillness of night, as waves broke gently on the nearby shore, a primordial song drifted softly across the waters to the lone sentinel waiting atop our anchored vessel.

Those waves had been breaking on those shores for millennia, of course, and had, having witnessed the deeds of many across time, a thousand stories written into their song - hadn't they, after all, known of the exploits of d'Iberville, la Salle, de Soto, and seen the many middens as the first people built them? And now, these many years later, I wonder, what stories were planted on my ears those evenings?

Those many middens (or Indian mounds) scattered across the southeast United States have long been a mystery for historians and archaeologists – we just are not sure who built them, but we have clues. Hernando de Soto (b. 1500, Badajoz, Spain, d. 1542, near modern day Ferriday, Louisiana, on the banks of the Mississippi River) began his famous expedition in 1539 at what is today called Tampa Bay with an entourage of 700 men, 240 war horses, various dogs and pigs, traveling through Florida and as far north as the Carolinas, then back west through current day Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, finally reaching (modern) central Louisiana on the Mississippi River, where he died of a fever in 1542. The following year (1543) what was left of his expedition (only 311 men survived) made it down south on the river to the Gulf of Mexico. At every turn de Soto and his men encountered indigenous peoples; the constant confrontations between Europeans and First Peoples are very well documented, and their populations were significant. In 1682, however, when Robert de la Salle (b. 1643, France, d. 1687, in Texas) sailed down the Mississippi River from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, it is reported that the Indian population had been decimated over the course of these 140 years.

What is believed to have happened is the European men, horses, dogs, and pigs that made up de Soto's retinue had been carrying infectious diseases against which the indigenous peoples had no natural resistance; they were almost wiped out over the course of that century. Entire towns had disappeared, societal continuity had been transformed, and historical information lost in the cultural upheaval that followed – and so, although we do not today have a definitive answer as to the identity of the mound builders, we have some degree of certainty about what probably happened to them.

What we do know, or rather think we know, is a faction of the Creek nation moved in to fill a void left by the apocalypse. By the time of d'Iberville and Bienville's arrival in 1699 the folks we know as the Biloxi Indians had also largely disappeared. They had in time moved west to merge with the Tunica tribe and their bloodline may be found today on a reservation at 150 Melacon Road, Marksville, Louisiana.

What is perhaps more significant for Biloxi is the fact the Las Salle could not find the mouth of the Mississippi upon his return from Spain in 1684. He over shot his mark, searching for it too far to the

west – in desperation his crew finally murdered him in 1687 at their camp on the Brazos River (in what is today Texas), and the entire troop perished in the months that followed.

In 1699 d'Iberville was sent to by the king of France to find the mouth of the Mississippi and to establish a fort there to protect the lands west of the River, claimed by France, from the English and Spanish colonists. Unfortunately, d'Iberville also had difficulty finding a suitable site for a fort on the Mississippi. He turned to the bay at Biloxi where he built Fort Maurepas on her north shore, and took advantage of the natural deep water on the west side of Ship Island, stationing his ships there to guard the coastline. The capitol of the French Louisiana was not moved to the Mississippi River until a new settlement was built at New Orleans in 1722.

It should be known that in our own time a young friend and I stepped up to maintain that rich tradition of exploration: As the years passed and I grew older, I was able to convince my parents to let me bring a friend along on our Ship Island outings, and I was further able to convince them to drop us off on the east tip of the island for the afternoon while they spent the day deep sea fishing from our boat. As is widely known, young teenage boys are quite skilled in the art of exercising poor judgment, but I believe Oren and I raised that bar a notch or two in this regard on one memorable occasion - we decided our reconnaissance would take us west from our drop off point for several miles along the north shore of the island and after an hour or so we could cut across to the south side of the island to head back for the end of the day rendezvous with our ride home. However, after a time we encountered an impasse, a forested stretch blocking our way across the mainland to the south shore, and so we continued our westward march and soon found ourselves separated from the main body of the island by a small inlet. We decided, without giving the matter much careful thought (because, why would we?) we would swim the quarter mile across the mouth of that bay to the other side before continuing our quest.

So here we are, alone on this island, swimming across the mouth of this inlet, the far shore seeming ever further with each passing minute and, just as we reached the midpoint between the tip of the peninsula and that far shore we heard, and saw, a tremendous splash near the forested interior bank of that bay, no more than a quarter of a mile east of us, and the two of us immediately wondered, "How large a crocodile would it take to make such a big splash?" and, "Can we reach that faraway shore before he reaches us?" Well, we did make it to that far shore, and lived to tell the story which, we are we are proud to believe, is now recorded in those timeless annals of the gently breaking waves.

#2109 Camp Wilkes Road

One may marvel at the level of prowess and the many accomplishments of our small neighborhood clan and wonder from whence came our many skills. Well, Carl, Charlie, and I were members of Boy Scout Troop 250, and our adroitness in so many things might be said to have stemmed from our years of training with that association. We met weekly with our troop at the "Quonset Hut" on the campus of Our Lady of Fatima Church in Biloxi, and it is perhaps apropos that this type of structure was first developed for use by the military in World War II, for it is in that hut we first acquired the know-how we would need for our later campaigns: how to set up a tent, roll up a sleeping bag, tie various types of knots, build a fire, roast marshmallows, etc., but we really sharpened our skills on our many visits to Camp Wilkes.

Camp Wilkes was named for Eugene P. Wilkes (1885-1980), editor of the Daily Herald for more than 50 years and a devoted friend to the Boy Scouts of the Gulf Coast. When Camp Wilkes was dedicated in June of 1938, it occupied a small tract of land on the south side of Biloxi Bay next to the old Coast Guard Base, but in 1942, as Keesler Air Force Base needed to expand, the camp was moved to an 89 acre site on the north side of the bay just east of Popp's Ferry Bridge. Here scouts would come to camp in the forest for a weekend several times a year or for an entire week in the summer. Accommodations initially included a small number of wooden cabins with no running water, heat, or AC, but the grounds now have a 290 person "bed capacity". A 35' by 75' pool was added in 1950, and in this pool we some years later learned the many species of swimming strokes, how to use them to rescue swimmers in danger and, perhaps most importantly, how throw oneself into the water to make the largest splash possible.

It may come as no surprise that at Camp Wilkes the three of us also learned how to cook the best beef stew known to mankind: a portion of ground beef is tossed onto a layer of tin foil to which cut up potatoes and carrots are added - the foil is then rolled up, tossed into the hot coals of a smoldering campfire, and cooked for about 45 minutes – we proved that even a 12 year old can do it! In retrospect, I think it is just possible the acquisition of this particular skill may have been the very thing that convinced our troop leader Mr. Comstock all three of us should be promoted to the rank of Eagle Scout, and with this recognition the three of us finally gained the confidence to share our considerable know-how with the rest of our clan.

Coda

Autumn showed herself this morning - in those final moments before the rising sun peeked out over the treeline just beyond my back yard, as a fog bank drifted in from forested darkness, in those misty shadows before dawn, autumn showed herself, a reminder of all the many autumn comings welcomed through the years, seasons upon whose shelves half-known secrets, memories, fragmented and faded, of a once known childhood in places now reimagined and of childhood friends whose lives have now been lived, almost forgotten with time, might still be found, a reminder also that with the coming winter shadows will further darken, memories will further fade, and we will so wish we had remembered more and cherished more and shared more of what once was - and so it is I find some degree of gladness in knowing some several memories from that cache have indeed survived, and those several memories are now put down for posterity.