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Audie Murphy Brought It Fame; Charles Watson Brought It Shame [Farmersville]

By Bill Porterfield

FARMERSVILLE - There was a time when most Americans lived in small towns. They liked it and prospered. And every town came to be known for something special.

Luling had its watermelons. Cuero had its turkeys. Farmersville, some 40 miles up the road here from Dallas, in Collin County, was known for its onions. Bermuda onions. Row upon row, they covered the rolling farm country in a rich green corduroy, until the people of Farmersville began to think of their home town as the onion capital of the world.

They had a sense of humor about it. They named their onion the East Collin Sweet, and advertised it as a "breath tablet deluxe." Sweetens the nation's breath, they said.

But of course, Farmersville's fame was only regional. It was really no more distinctive than a thousand other towns across America. This is not to say that it was not a good place in which to live. Obviously it was. It was proudly a place for the simpler virtues of work and worship, of home and school and church and a way of life that was comfortable and secure. Neighbors could be counted on. Strangers rarely passed. The people went to bed at night without locking their doors.

The town produced men who were merchants, millers and Masons, optometrists and Optimists, ranchers and Rotarians, electricians and Lions. Solid types, who, if they did not bring fame to Farmersville, brought no shame.

Incredible Report From the War

Then one day Farmersville was in Life Magazine, the Saturday Evening Post and newspapers all over the country. It took a hero to put Farmersville on the map and it took a war to find him. His name was Audie Murphy, a poor little Irish kid from over on Cottage St. The word from combat about Audie was almost unbelievable.

At Ramatuelle he had run ahead of his outfit, under terrific fire, crouching and lugging a machine gun he had found. He killed two advancing Germans, wounded two and captured five. Then he led his men on to capture an entire enemy garrison.

Later, at Holtzwhir, he had climbed atop a burning tank destroyer, manned the gun and held off 250 Germans and six German tanks, single-handedly, for an hour.

Home and Then Hollywood

Audie came home in 1945 with three wounds and 14 medals, the most decorated combat soldier in World War II. As Life Magazine said, he "was the greatest thing that ever happened to Farmersville."

He came home at the head of a parade. He heard four speeches and a band concert. The mayor presented him with $1750 worth of war bonds bought by the townspeople. They asked him to say a few words. So he said, "I know you people don't want to stand in this hot sun any longer and look at me."

The next day, when a gaggle of girls cornered him for autographs in a Dallas store,

he wrote in their books that he was "a fugitive from the law of averages."

After the fuss died down, Audie hung around for a while. He blushed at the attention of the girls, licked a bully who berated his medals, and then one day he went to Sam West, now the postmaster.

"Mr. West," he said. "They want me to come out to Hollywood and be in pictures. What do you think?"

"Audie." West said, "You oughta give Hollywood a chance."

And that's what Audie Murphy did. He did well. He stopped coming back to Farmersville, and the town settled back into its old obscurity. Nurturing everyday, ordinary Americans.

Farmersville has changed since the youth of Audie Murphy, just as Mason City, Iowa, and Sauk Centre, Minn., have changed since the days of Meredith Wilson and Sinclair Lewis.

No longer is it removed from the rest of us by distance, bad roads and the cotton-padding of country ways and traditions. The onions have long since gone. Oh, there are still pickup trucks lined up on the square and there is grain and cotton and stock farming. But the land is getting too expensive to plow.

Farmhouses rot in the countryside and implements stand frozen in rust. Most of the men work in Dallas now. It is only a few minutes by car. There is a lot of traffic through Farmersville now and the people lock their doors at night.

We all know what is happening. Dallas is sucking the life-blood out of Farmersville, and have been for a long time. (It is a law of civilization that cities devour villages and work corruption on country youths.)

The past is in the quiet country and the present is in the clamorous cities. This is not necessarily an improvement in the human condition, but it is a fact we must accept.

The world is too much with us, even in Farmersville. There are houses all over town with old cellars in the backyards, but you seldom see anyone go into them now. The television is on in the living room, dumping Vietnam, Biafra, Timothy Leary and Dick Gregory right into our laps. Our kids are getting instant feedback on everything under the sun, and at an impressionable age. What makes news is crisis and disaster and revolution. The kids have begun to ask questions.

Same Beginning, Different Ending

Audie Murphy was not a fugitive from the laws of averages because he challenged the values of his elders. In those simpler times, the best kind of son was an obedient one. And the best man was the one who fought well in war. Audie minded. The only time he was reckless was in battle.

Charles Watson began the same way. And then it seemed he couldn't wait to refute all that he had been taught. What he ran into was the youth culture, a new profession in America. It doesn't license murder, but simply gives wing to the impatient perfectionists who are one and twenty.

Charles Watson's revolt was in the extreme, as if in one countdown he blasted off from the hard and confining Earth of Collin County. A lifetime of hymns couldn't hold him.

Accused in Sharon Tate Case

Now after 23 years, reporters are back in Farmersville, asking questions about a native son who also is a fugitive from the law of averages.

But where Audie Murphy was honored for killing, Charles Watson has been hunted down and jailed because Los Angeles police believe he is one of the drug-dogged youths

Charles Manson sent to murder actress Sharon Tate and six others.

Watson's arrest at the hands of his second cousin, Collin County Sheriff Tom Montgomery, left friends and neighbors shaking their heads in disbelief.

Charles was Denton and Elizabeth Watson's boy. The Watsons lived down at Copeville, a pause in the road 7 miles south of town. They ran a grocery store and filling station. Salt-of-the-earth type people. In the county for generations. They didn't have money, but they had a grace of living that was American gothic.

Denton and Elizabeth sold antiques as well as soda pop, crackers and high octane. They endured in a plain little house and sang and prayed in a modest Methodist church like the churches Grant Wood painted into our memories.

Denton and Elizabeth hang close to one another now, moving like things stricken, between house and store and church. Sometimes they go into McKinney, where their son sits in jail, fighting extradition to Los Angeles.

There was a time, not long ago, when Denton Watson liked to drive his pickup into Farmersville on Saturday, the morning after the high school football game. Charles was a halfback and people on the square were usually talking about him. Big and fast, he made all-district for three years. What made his mother proud were his grades. He was a senior favorite and an usher at graduation.

'He's Not The Same Boy'

The other day, Farmersville Mayor Raymond Brandon, a grocer by trade, took a puff on his cigar and told reporters, "We just can't understand it. Charles wasn't raised that way. He's not the same boy that left here."

What happened? they ask. Why didn't Charles turn out like his two good friends, Dale James and Tommy Carraway? Dale and Tommy, tackle and guard, had opened holes for Charles to run through. Now Dale manages the Western Auto and goes to the Masonic Hall on Tuesday nights. Tommy was killed in Vietnam.

They brought Tommy Carraway's body home in December, 1967. Dale and Charles were among the pallbearers. It was the first time Farmersville had seen Charles Watson since he had quit North Texas State to go to California.

Charles has changed. Dale James has noticed this. It wasn't a big thing. His hair was a little full. At the cemetery behind the football field he told conflicting stories about what he was doing out in California. He told Dale he owned a couple of hairdressing salons. He told someone else he was selling television commercials.

Vulnerable to Manson's Clan

How much Charles Watson had changed did not strike Farmersville until last December, when Sheriff Montgomery called Copeville and told Denton Watson to bring Charles in. Charles had drifted in from California several weeks before, clean-shaven again and rather subdued. He had hung around the house and had shown little interest in renewing old friendships in town.

Murder is not alien to Main Street and Middle America. What really blows their minds in Farmersville is the realization that one of their young, one who was raised in the straight and narrow, could be vulnerable to the pagan enticements of Charles Manson's hippie clan.

Drugs, sex, radical ideas, strange dress, long hair, wild music. If a Charles Watson could succumb, what about my kids? This is a fear that is on the minds of parents, not only in Farmersville, but all across America.

No one can be sure about it but it appears that Charles Watson had his first introduction to drugs while attending North Texas State at Denton. This provoked Bill Bishop, the principal at Farmersville High, to remark, “It almost makes you afraid to send your kids off to college anymore.”

But Denton is no foreign land. Alien corn isn’t grown there, just turned-on country kids.

It isn’t only the world out there that is changing. We are all being changed, from the town square to midtown Manhattan.