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Two unforgettable boys from Farmersville

By Bill Porterfield

There was a time in America when most of the people lived in small towns. They liked it and prospered. Such a place was Farmersville, some 40 miles up the road from Dallas in Collin County. Every burgh was known for something special. Weatherford had its watermelons. Cuero had its turkeys. Farmersville was known for its 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 hometown as the onion capital of the world.

Oh, they had a sense of humor about it. They named their onion the East Collin Sweet, and advertised it as a "Breath Tablet Deluxe." But of course Farmersville's fame was only regional. It was a place for the simpler virtues of work and worship, of home and church and cotton gin. Such a way of life can be narrow and conforming, but it is also comfortable and secure. The rhythm of life was as slow and predictable as the change of seasons. Neighbors could be counted on, and strangers rarely passed. The people went to bed at night without locking their doors. Besides farmers, the town produced men who were merchants and millers and Masons, optometrists and Optimists, ranchers and Rotarians, electricians and Lions. Solid, stolid types' who, if they did not bring fame to Farmersville, brought no shame.

And then one day Farmersville was in Life Magazine and 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 Street. The dispatches from the front about Audie were 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 others, and captured five. Then he led his men on to capture an entire enemy garrison.

Later, at Holtzwihr, 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. His company commander wrote:

"Twice we lost sight of him in clouds of smoke and flame. His clothing was riddled, his trouser leg was soaked with blood. But Murphy's deadly fire killed dozens of Nazis and the enemy line weakened."

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

The funny thing was that until his heroics, most of the people in Farmersville had never heard of Audie Murphy. And the few who knew him felt sorry for him. The Murphys had come to town in the thirties, a ragged bunch who had failed at sharecropping. The father, Pat, was a drinking, brawling man, and it was not long before he abandoned his wife and kids. One can understand Audie's enlisting on his l7th birthday. He was no bigger than a minute, a baby-faced non-entity.

Four years later, he was home a hero, signing autographs, writing in one girl's book that he was "a fugitive from the law of averages."

After the fuss died down, Audie went off to Hollywood. He fared well enough to where he stopped coming back to Farmersville and the town settled back into its old obscurity, nurturing everyday, ordinary Americans.

Research provided by Stan Smith, Editor (Ret.), The Audie Murphy National Fan Club

And then one day, after 23 years, reporters were back in Farmersville, asking questions about a native son who, like Audie Murphy, was a fugitive from the law of averages.

But where Audie was honored for killing, Charles Watson had been hunted down and jailed because Los Angeles police believed he was 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 out at Copeville, a pause in the road seven miles south of town. They ran a grocery store and filling station. Salt of the earth type people. In the county for generations. No, they didn't have money, but they had a grace of living that was Gothic American. Denton and Elizabeth sold primitive antiques as well as soda pop and crackers and high octane. They endured in a plain little house and sang and prayed in a modest Methodist Church.

There had been a time, not long before, when Denton Watson couldn't wait to drive into Farmersville on a Saturday the morning after the high school football game. Charles had been a halfback and people on the square were usually talking about him. Big and fast, he had made all-district three years running. He was a senior favorite and an usher at graduation. Now his daddy and mother drove into town in shame.

After Charles' arrest, Mayor Raymond Brandon, a grocer by trade, told reporters, “We just can't understand it. Charles wasn't raised that way. He's not the same boy that left here.”

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

His revolt was in the extreme, as if in one drug induced countdown he had blasted off from the hard and confining earth of Collin County. A lifetime of hymns couldn't hold him.

Almost a decade has passed since all that socio-psychopathy. Just about the time we think the country has shifted into a more conservative gear, some thing altogether insane happens to drive us back to the brink. And we again raise the old question and cling to our tripping children. The fact that Manson, Watson and most members of the gang are still in prison offers but little surcease. We look nervously for the bad seeds in each new crop of kids, and grimace at Watson himself, in a bizarre regression, renewal or whatever you call it, preaches the word to his fellow inmates.

The Farmersvilles of America will never be the same. They are no longer removed from the rest of us by bad roads and the insularity of country ways and traditions. The onions have long since gone. There are still pickups lined up on the square and there is and cotton and stock farming. But the land is getting too expensive to plow. Farmhouses rot in the fields and implements stand frozen in rust. Most of the menfolk work in Dallas now. It is only minutes by car. There is a lot of traffic through Farmersville, now the people lock their doors at night.

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