

A View From the Plankyard

Byrdstown, Tennessee

By Darren Shell

Every now and then, I drop my old 1958 Lyman runabout off the lift and go float around someplace on the Dale and study my old maps. It's amazing what you can see as you drift along while the gentle lapping waves tap on the side of the boat. If you use your imagination, you can see this place as it was, some sixty-five years ago. In my mind, I can see the old roads and buildings. I can picture the forgotten cemeteries beneath the waves. I can just feel the history pulsating beneath me.

Let's motor up to Byrdstown and check things out, shall we?

* * *

I reach over and shut off the ignition. The old Lyman glides on through the waves near Sunset Marina as drops of Dale Hollow dry on its mahogany bow. The warm sun feels great on my back, and I can't resist a quick dip in the lake. Ahhhh! Don't get no better 'n Dale Hollow.

Today, I'm floating near the water plant, just outside of the no ski zone in front of Obey River Campground. Seems like an unassuming place, I must say. It's just a big open body of water where the city of Byrdstown draws its water with this giant steel pier along shore. This northern bank has a twisted, narrow little road carved into its face. This old road looks like nothing but a nearly forgotten logging trail, but it was once so much more. It's hard to believe that sixty-five years ago that this was the most heavily traveled road in Pickett County. Hundreds of thousands of vehicles traversed this crude path up the mountain. Right where we float, right in front of this nicely built water-pumping structure, once stood the Obey River Bridge. And she was a beauty.

It's hard to imagine this giant body of water as only a narrow river. The bridge that crossed this river was enormous in its day, even though the colossal bridge we now see would have dwarfed it by immeasurable means. It started out as a ferry and then became the concrete statue that most considered the greatest structure of its day. It connected the town of Byrdstown to its sister city, Livingston, Tennessee. Old Hwy 42 wound down through the campground and crossed the river to the northern shore. On this north bank sat The Plankyard. It was a logging stop along the river for years, and became known as The Plankyard for its numerous wood sawing ventures for the city of Byrdstown. Even to this day, local boaters still launch their boats where their ancestors did...at The Plankyard.

Let's look around and see what else we can see.

What is now the campground, was once a fantastic natural pasture. Native American Indians first farmed these shores long before we Americans took a liking to

them. This long riverside farming community eventually became home to many families here in the valley. Parrises and Copes, Warrens and Robbins all lived here...and died here. Three different cemeteries were moved from these acres before the lake was flooded. Parris Island still shows signs of its long-ago graveyard. Most of these souls were moved to the Cope Cemetery in Byrdstown, hopefully disrupted for the last time.

Let's see...what else. Look far, far upstream. Just at the bend of the river beyond the marina was a tiny community uncommonly known as Winningham. No, it's not on any maps. It's not documented anywhere, really. But it is where a family of African Americans had created their homestead. Black folk were few back in those days, and this little section of river was but a tiny little settlement of a handful of logging men and their families. The logging men of the day worked the hard and dangerous Obey River to feed their families. They too had their own cemeteries along the river. Their graves were supposedly moved as well. Shame, though...not one African American name was documented during the grave removals to build the lake. Not one. Unfortunately, many of the blacks had little money for official headstones, and of course, those were different days, decades ago. The world is different now. So, even though the Corps never named the black cemeteries, I choose to call these little graveyards by their names. The first is the Winningham Cemetery (13 graves moved). The next one upstream is the Byrd Cemetery (2 graves, husband and wife). All African American *Unknowns* were reentered at Freehill Cemetery in Celina, where every black person was removed to. They are no longer where they wanted to be. They are all piled up together in Celina, Tennessee...along with their kindred.

There is another tidbit of interesting history viewable from here. If we look downstream, just behind the campground, we will notice the high bluff that overlooks the lake. It is now a series of subdivisions full of houses. But it was once home to this area's very first settlers. Few realize that on the point overlooking Eagle Creek, high up on the bluff, is the cemetery known as Keisling/Knight Cemetery. The main reason I mention it is because of its residents. I don't like to talk about graves all the time, but those buried in this cemetery lived in a time nothing like what we know as normal. These people helped forge this country...not just Tennessee, but this country. In this tiny graveyard over Dale Hollow, veterans from four different wars are buried. And I'm not talking about recent history, people. I'm talking true founding Americans. Those who lived and died for this country long before this country's sense of entitlement has gotten so out-of-whack.

In this precious piece of real-estate, there are veterans from the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Civil War, and one as recent as the war with Korea. With a cemetery with so little as 27 interments, to have veterans of four wars is noteworthy...it's amazing really. I canvassed the headstones in 2006. It was a moving experience for me.

But I think its time I awaken from this daydream. My boat has nearly drifted ashore. I'm sure I'm sunburned. And you know...I'm hungry. I'll bet Sunset's got nachos with my name on them. I'll bet I can make those nachos...*history!* Or I'm not the Gravedigger.~