

SHA' HELL... AND GOOD CORN LIQUOR:
THE LEGACY OF SILAS BUTTS

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Silas Noah Butts was known as "the mountain man" in Oconee County, South Carolina. During the first half of the twentieth century, Silas and his wife, Louisa, maintained an unofficial orphanage at their home where they took in children of all ages. Silas built a schoolhouse for the orphans on his farm and yet, he could neither read nor write. He was most notorious for his moonshining and humor, especially within the courtroom. This thesis deals with the legacy that Silas Butts has left behind. His intentions for "adopting" the children are examined as well as their education and his moonshining. Louisa Butts has remained in the shadow of Silas' legacy and yet her role at their home was crucial to their survival. This thesis utilizes newspapers and court records combined with personal interviews to illustrate how Silas Butts is remembered nearly fifty years after his death. The memories of Silas Butts differ with each account and thus, provide an illustration of how time and memory often work together and at times, against one another.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my Granddaddy, Ray N. Gambrell,
who began my interest in Silas Butts as a young boy and
has encouraged my schoolwork ever since.

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Also, I want to thank my family: Grandmama, Granddaddy, Papa, Granny, Mama, Daddy (Richard), Nathan and April. My brother summed it up once when he said, "It ain't not been done yet."

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INTRODUCTION

I put an ad' in the local paper seeking information on Silas Butts. I included my phone number and address. I am often naive. In search of information about Silas Butts, I decided to let those who wanted to talk to get in touch with me. My phone rang for a solid week. From 5:30 in the morning until well after dark each day, over fifty people called that week, and they have continued to call these many months afterwards. Calls came from family, friends, and seemingly anyone who had ever heard of Silas from South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia and even New Mexico.

The very first call came at 12:30 p.m. while I was in a bookstore and the man simply told me to find someone else to write my paper about. The mail had obviously just run because another call came as soon as he had finished, followed immediately by another. I began scheduling interviews, as many as four a day. I had hit the thesis jackpot. I talked with and met all sorts of people, from the "little ol' blue-haired ladies" in town, to people at the end of dirt roads as long as the list of directions it took to get there. Some people hesitated when they met a

college student with long hair and a beard whereas others had their daughters call back and ask me out.

Not being able to answer all the calls at once, many left messages while I was talking to others. I immediately got excited at a message from a man named "Jim." Jim was not his real name, as he said he would not tell me his real name. He claimed to have something about Silas Butts never seen by anyone else. I was excited. "Jim" left no number but said he would call back at 9:00 p.m. sharp.

At 9:00 that night, I could only be found in the field beside my house. It was the only place I was sure to get a signal on my cell phone. I did not want to miss Jim's call. At 9:00 sharp, my phone rang. The number was "Restricted." "Jim" agreed to meet me but not at his house or mine. He suggested that we meet at Silas' farm up in Brasstown, Tuesday at 2:00. I waited impatiently until Tuesday.

In the meantime, the owner of the Butts' farm suggested that we not meet there as the neighbors would immediately alert the police of trespassers. I was in a bind. A man with "something about Silas never before seen" was to meet me at Silas' where we would get arrested and I had no way of getting in touch with him.

Come Tuesday, I drove to Brasstown, parked at the locked gate to the Butts' farm, got out and sat on the hood of my jeep and waited for God knows what. At 2:15, a car drove up, the passenger window rolled down and an old man with a beard and cane asked me if I was having car trouble. When I assured him that I was not and that I was waiting on someone, he casually noted that he would just get out and look around at the farm. He told his driver to park the car. After a few minutes of casual and awkward chit-chat, the man stuck out his hand and quietly stated, "I'm Jim."

"Jim" proceeded to check me for a gun as he assured me that he was not gay. I played along. We began to talk about many things. It seemed that we talked about most everything except Silas. Somewhere in this conversation, "Jim" came up with secret code names for us both. I will not include these names here because, as we agreed, they are secret. We were to use these names to contact each other.

I got little out of Jim that day on the side of the road about Silas. I did learn a lot about cars, welding, Jim's deteriorating health, as well as where the buck-eye tree was on down the valley. What he did have to say about Silas was not flattering. He also informed me that

I owed him \$20. For what, I was not sure. I showed him the three dollars that I had on me but that did not suit him. Finally he got around to showing me what he had that had "never before been seen about Silas." He went back to the car, where his driver still sat patiently, and came back with a framed picture. He showed me. It had nothing to do with Silas. Then he proceeded to take the back off of the picture where a photograph was hidden. He showed me this old photograph of Silas and his wife drawing water from the well. This is what had "never before been seen." I did not have the heart to tell him that someone had given me a copy of the same photograph two days earlier. And with that, Jim said he would be in touch.

I have to admit, the secret games were fun and I wondered what would happen next. Two days later, while I was building the bed for my dad's 1917 Model T, my dad found "Jim" banging on the side of his house with his cane. I had given the paper my parents' address. I said I was naive, not stupid.

I looked up, and here came Jim, followed by my dad with a strange look on his face. Apparently, Jim would not speak to my dad. I guess this was because he didn't have a secret code name. After nervous chit-chat, I took Jim for a walk away from my dad. Jim had decided to sell

me his information and the picture for an amount that I will not mention. I still couldn't tell him that I already had the picture. I told him that I would have to think about it. At that, he stopped dead in his tracks and started heading back to his car, where the same mysterious driver sat again. On the way, he informed me that I still owed him \$20. I showed him the same three dollars in my pocket. At that point, "Jim" realized that he was getting no money from me and I realized that I had not changed my overalls in three days.

I laughed with many people about the crazy stories they told about Silas. I almost cried with one woman though. Most people would not tell details about the "dark side" of Silas. Evelyn Walker did. She called one day and asked me if I wanted to know "the good or the bad." I asked if she would talk on tape and she humbly accepted. When I arrived, I sat with her and her mother at the kitchen table. She was cautious but she proceeded to tell me stories of "the bad," including those of rape and abuse. Her mother sat quietly at the other end of the table. In the middle of the interview, I thanked her for telling me those kind of stories. With that, she offered me a glass of tea. I accepted. Ms. Walker made good tea. I realized that I had gained her trust.

I first learned of Silas Butts listening to my own Granddaddy tell his stories, which are included in the following pages. What is not included is Grandmama's story. Grandmama was from London and had never met Silas but had heard many stories about him. So many that when she bumped into him downtown one day for the first time, she knew who he was immediately. Grandmama died before I sat down and recorded her story. The importance of time became evident to me as I sat down and interviewed these older citizens of Oconee County. Ten years ago, this thesis would have been easier to obtain information for and the outcome may very well have been different. Ten years from now, it could probably not be done.

The other problem that many historians face is how much information is enough? Reluctantly, there are many people that I did not get to speak with. Many people, I know, have information but are unwilling to share it. There comes a time when one has to use just what he has and make what one can of it.

Silas Butts left a legacy with Oconee County and far beyond. This is not, however, the history of Silas Butts. Rather, it is a look at his legacy and how local people remember him and what he did. Being born twenty four years after his death, I am not in the position to write

a complete history of Silas' life. However, I am in the position to listen and create a synthesis about how people remember and retell the ever-present stories about Silas as well as the community itself.

PREFACE

Silas Noah Butts did something most people never accomplish. He created "a legacy," to such an extent that people still talk about him nearly fifty years after his death. Silas is known for being a mountain man in northern Oconee County who ran an orphanage, a grist mill and moonshine. He and his wife, Louisa, never had children of their own, yet they helped to raise as many as fifty "orphans." Silas built these children a one-room school on his farm and used the children to work his large farm in Brasstown Valley.

Silas is known for his wit and humor which he displayed during his many trips into nearby towns. He is known to have been his own lawyer in court, despite his inability to read or write. There are many characteristics about this mountain man that, together, helped to create his legendary status that lingers even to today.

However, not all recollections of Silas describe him as the humanitarian that he is often remembered as. Some recall that there was nothing good about the man at all and that he simply took in children because he needed farm

hands. It is interesting, therefore, to take a closer look at how and why such differing opinions exist all these years after his death.

It is also interesting to explore the fact that Silas' wife, Louisa Rholetter Butts, is often forgotten. In fact, many of those who retell these stories about Silas, never even knew that he was married. Louisa served an important role at the remote "orphanage" and why she is forgotten not only reveals details about her life, but inadvertently, illustrates how Silas used aspects of his life to promote his own legacy.

Silas Butts is obviously of local interest but his legacy also serves a larger purpose. Silas' legacy represents a transition between the stereotypical uneducated mountaineer and the progressive, modern world outside of Appalachia. At a time when railroads and textile mills were creating towns along the border of Appalachia, Silas was able to use both worlds to his advantage. Also, at a time encompassing two World Wars and the economic hardships in between, Silas most likely never realized the shift that he has come to represent. In fact, whether he actually served as this transition or not is not the point. It is his legacy that, through hindsight, shows a man who becomes a truck farmer instead

of a subsistence farmer and the overseer of an
"orphanage" which serves his own needs as well as those
of the community.