

LEGACY

When Silas Butts died in August of 1956, he completed his contributions to what had already become "his legacy." Being so widely known and popular in his life, it is therefore possible to use his legacy to illustrate how history and memory work together and oftentimes, against one another. It is also worth observing which aspects and characteristics of Silas' life are remembered. How true are they? Why do people remember what they do? Whereas these questions cannot completely be answered through Silas' legacy, a closer look can provide a better understanding of the relationship between history and memory.

Silas was a legend even before he died. This is illustrated in John Bigham's article about him in *The State* in 1953. He opens the article by explaining his assignment:

The assignment was to find Silas Butts in Oconee county and determine what kind of character he was and whether the tales concerning him which had drifted down the state were of whole cloth or fabrications arising from rumors, legends, and folklore circulating in South Carolina's hill country. Taking advantage of a weeks vacation at the State Park above Walhalla this past July, I made a thorough study of a truly fabulous mountaineer and found that here was a human landmark towering head and shoulders in renown above his fellow citizens in the state's northwest corner and whose

fame spilled over into neighboring areas of North Carolina and Georgia. All this in spite of the fact that Silas Butts is hardly known down state below Anderson.<sup>171</sup>

Bigham's use of words such as "fabulous," "human landmark," and "fame" illustrates a legend or legacy that had already been created even before he died. Indeed, he had made enough of an impression on this man 150 miles away for Bigham to come and seek him out.

Silas created a legacy that portrayed him as a good-natured hero who saved little mountain children. In fact, Silas' life resembles that of a fairy tale. Bigham describes his departure from Brasstown:

As we drove away that morning from Silas' Castle in the hills, his children waved us farewell and the time honored injunction to "Come back again" rang in our ears as we headed the car down the rocky road toward US 76 and Westminster.<sup>172</sup>

Views such as Bigham's have led to how Silas is remembered today. Perhaps romanticized notions of Silas and his efforts as a humanitarian have helped create the memory of him that lingers.

A family history, *Butts Generations*, notes that Silas was scheduled to appear on the television show,

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<sup>171</sup> Bigham.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

*This Is Your Life*, just before he died. While the Library of Congress could not confirm his scheduling, the fact that many people found this rumor feasible well illustrates the legend of Silas as an exceptional man and a man of some significance. The show was in reruns at the time of his death but episodes immediately preceding his death included people such as Milton Berle. The idea that Silas would appear on *This Is Your Life*, the same show in which someone like Milton Berle appeared, denotes him, for those who knew him or thought they knew him, as more than just another "old man from the mountains."<sup>173</sup>

Another interesting connection to popular culture mentioned in an interview with the current owner of the Butts' farm, linked Silas Butts with the well-known comic character Snuffy Smith. The immediate comparison encompassed the similarities in the moonshining of two funny men who lived up in the mountains. A closer comparison revealed similarities in their wife's names: Louisa Butts as compared to Lowizie Smith. An article exploring "The Appalachian Backgrounds of Billy De Beck's Snuffy Smith" explains that "Snuffy Smith, Lowizie, and their nephew Jughaid embody stereotyped Appalachian

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<sup>173</sup> Rosemary Hanes, email to author, 21 October 2002.

language and situations. This is more than coincidence." De Beck did travel through parts of Appalachia in order to gain knowledge for his comic character Snuffy Smith. It is unlikely, though, that there were any connections to Silas Butts. In the article, Appalachian Historian Thomas Inge notes:

What first sparked De Beck's interest is unknown. We do know, however, that in preparation for the new episodes he traveled through the mountains of Virginia and Kentucky, talked to natives, made numerous sketches, and read everything he could lay his hands on that treated mountaineer life. Just how extensive and thorough his reading was has not been generally known...<sup>174</sup>

Nonetheless, the fact that people found the thought of Silas' inspiration of the cartoon character plausible and talked about it played its part in the creation of local myth and the legacy of Silas Butts. It is not all too outrageous that Silas' character and personality could have done this, despite the fact that they probably did not.

Further evidence to the notion that allows the possibility of Silas' fame to reach far beyond the Upstate of South Carolina came from Randolph Phillips. Mr. Phillips recalled:

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<sup>174</sup> Thomas Inge, "The Appalachian Backgrounds of Billy De Beck's Snuffy Smith," *Appalachian Journal* 4 (Winter 1977): 121.

I seen a picture sometime- somewhere here awhile back, him [Silas] and Teddy Roosevelt. Teddy Roosevelt was... It was a shooting match somewhere or another. And Ol' Silas was in that picture- a very young Silas... You could see that that was Silas Butts. Ain't three or four people look like Silas.<sup>175</sup>

Whether or not Silas did pose for a picture with Teddy Roosevelt is unknown. However, the believability in people's minds that this is possible is very much a part of Silas Butt's legacy. His legacy allows for the possibility that he is pictured with Teddy Roosevelt.

Stories of Silas visiting and being visited by the Governor of South Carolina, Olin D. Johnston, have also fueled and supported the legacy of Silas Butts. In an article appearing in the *Anderson Independent* in 1968, Jerry Alexander writes of some of what he calls "the true episodes that have been almost forgotten down through the years." He notes:

One concerned the new stetson that Silas received from Gov. Olin D. Johnston following the Governor's visit to Silas' mountain home... Silas prized that black stetson more than anything else and often showed it to his many friends. After all, it wasn't everyday that one received a new stetson as a gift from the Governor.

...Silas had previously met Governor Johnston on a business trip to Columbia in which he sought help from the Governor. According to reports, Silas got the aid he went after. Then Silas asked the Governor if he might sit in the Governor's chair

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<sup>175</sup> Randolph Phillips, 12 June 2003.

saying, "I always did want to sit in that chair." Needless to say, this wish was granted, amidst whoops of good-natured laughter in which, Silas himself joined in.<sup>176</sup>

A visit to the Governor as well as from the Governor (not to mention the gift) illustrates the range of Silas' legacy, even before he died.

The effort to place the Butts Farmstead on the National Register of Historic Places also gives evidence to Silas' lingering legacy. Although the farm was begun by Silas' grandfather, it was the fact that Silas "turned the place into an orphanage" that occasioned its consideration for The National Register. The buildings at the time included the log barn, which served as the first house, the gristmill, the main house occupied by Silas, his wife and the children, his schoolhouse, the corn crib, hen house and Model T car shed.<sup>177</sup> For whatever reason, the farm was not accepted onto the National Register; however, the mere fact that it was nominated illustrates the legacy that Silas Butts left behind.

What is also interesting to note about Silas is the differences in the stories told about him. Two of the

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<sup>176</sup> Alexander.

<sup>177</sup> "The Butts Farmstead," nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

most popular stories, told and retold for over fifty years, are of his selling produce and liquor in town as well as his using the kids in court to get himself free. Many people who never knew or even saw Silas tell these stories, so often and in so many different versions, that it is hard to discern what really happened.

First of all, a look at the variations in the stories of his truck farming illustrates why his legacy lives on. Silas used everything that he could to his advantage. The children helped him grow produce to sell, and no doubt, helped him to make liquor in some fashion. In turn, he used the money from selling the produce and liquor to "support" the orphanage. Silas left an impression on many people throughout Oconee County on his many trips to town to sell his produce. He would travel to mill villages in Westminster, Walhalla, Seneca and Newry. It was his wit and humor that helped his business. Stories about these visits to town differ in many ways.

People recall him selling produce from a wagon pulled by horses, a wagon pulled by oxen, the rumble seat of a car, and out of the back of a truck. When telling this story, people almost always imitate Silas' loud, high-pitched that seemed to travel great distances. Words here cannot explain the similarities between the

imitations performed by old men and sweet old ladies alike. However, they always rattle off a list of the produce available, just as Silas would have done. These include apples, cabbage, corn, beans, watermelon, cantaloupe, green beans, Irish Potatoes, and turnips. Out of twelve interviews, eight included some variation of this story. Despite the differences in the produce and/or what Silas was driving, the story almost always ends with a pause, followed by, "...and good corn liquor!" The variations more than likely reflect the many times that Silas performed this act, as well as the fact that the importance of the story is that he sold liquor, not the produce.

Another story with as many variations as those who tell it is the episode about Silas taking his children to court. Yet again, Silas used all available means to keep his life together. His liquor sales to support the orphanage got him in trouble with the law. So, his humor and children served him in escaping this trouble. Of the twelve interviews, five tell of this incident. Other stories repeated by several include Mr. Sam and Seab cutting down one of two stills, the false report of Silas' drowning and the incident with the stop light, which has been told to have happened in Westminster,



Seneca, Anderson, and Greenville with a stop sign and a stop light.

The variations in the stories can be attributed to time as well as memory. Newspapers over the years that report a certain story themselves provide different variations. They fill in gaps in people's minds as well as provide additional information, much of it secondhand. However, the fact remains that these stories, variations notwithstanding, have helped to create the legacy of Silas Butts that began even before he died almost fifty years ago.

These few stories that are often retold account to only a small portion of Silas' life. Yet they often provide the entire knowledge that is remembered about his life. This fuels the fact that Silas is remembered for different things. Phrases used by those interviewed describe Silas as a "colorful character,"<sup>178</sup> "good personality,"<sup>179</sup> as well as "good hearted, in ways, he was wicked as he could be,"<sup>180</sup> and "good to some people, some

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<sup>178</sup> Gladys Elliott, 17 June 2003.

<sup>179</sup> Spec Jameson, 12 June 2003.

<sup>180</sup> Claude Gaillard, 21 February 2003.

people he wasn't... He wasn't good at all."<sup>181</sup> These views seem to contradict one another, despite the fact that they are about the same man. This occurs in many aspects of Silas' life. One remembers that Silas "brought them food one time when they were about to starve to death,"<sup>182</sup> whereas another recalls, "my grandmother, when she lived there, and a lot of mornings, she got up to make breakfast, all the family had was cornbread and water gravy. He [Silas] wouldn't let them have no food."<sup>183</sup> This does not sound like the same man.

In writing about the life of Silas' father, a nephew to Silas also notes this "other side" to Silas. The story goes that following the death of Silas' father, Silas promised that his mother could always live there in the house. However, Silas added a room onto the back porch that was "5 feet wide and 7 feet long... with no window, and a door with a slot cut in it." Apparently, Silas intended to keep his mother locked in this "tiny room" and send her food in through the slot.<sup>184</sup> Yet again, this

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<sup>181</sup> Evelyn Walker, 13 June 2003.

<sup>182</sup> Randolph Phillips, 12 June 2003.

<sup>183</sup> Evelyn Walker, 13 June 2003.

<sup>184</sup> Carlie Butts, *A Man Called Jake*, 388-389.

does not illustrate the same man that people often remember as a humanitarian.

Silas' legacy allows for this dichotomy. Isolated in Brasstown Valley on the edge of the Appalachian Mountains, Silas could be and most certainly was both of these characters. Evelyn Walker clearly summed this up when she said, "These papers here, you know, these books, if they only knew that man for what he really was, everything that they wrote, it wouldn't be good."<sup>185</sup> Silas was "no man's fool," and knew how to turn things in his favor. After almost fifty years, his legacy does this same thing.

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<sup>185</sup> Evelyn Walker, 13 June 2003.