

Carolyn Page

Marksberry Road

WHEN WE LIVED ON MARKSBERRY ROAD, IT DIDN'T HAVE A NAME. I don't mean it wasn't named something. What I'm saying is, nobody ever called it anything. It was always just the road that you turned off the main road onto when you got to the picnic woods.

And then, sometime after Daddy died, after losing control of his car and running into one of the big ditches along Marksberry Road, they put up a sign and then the road had a name. Daddy's dying on the road had nothing to do with them putting the sign up.

The sign saying Marksberry Road was light blue, of all colors, and looked like the signs you see on street corners in cities. It was tin, oblong and narrow, and it sat atop a silver-colored metal pole above everyone's heads, pointing the way, in white lettering, down Marksberry Road. It looked out of place on a country road. I remember the first time I saw it. It gave me a shock. I looked from the sign to the road and back, thinking, *This road has a name?*

They also blacktopped the road around the same time they put the sign up. When we lived on the road, in the little gray cinder block sharecropper shack, it was gravel and deep dust that cars and other vehicles threw up into long, rolling clouds behind them as they went and that, after they were gone, settled on everything, time and time again, layering it thick. The dust would literally get ankle deep in some low places by August. Always barefoot in summer, I remember wading in it like water.

After they blacktopped Marksberry Road, it was even more strange. Gone overnight were the clouds of dust, which also meant that the dust was gone from the ditches, as well. I was used to the weeds in the ditches being covered gray with it. Even the grasshoppers in the weeds were gray with the dust. After they paved the road, and after the first hard rain, the dust was washed off the weeds—and the grasshoppers—and both were made bright green again. Stones were no longer thrown up onto the roadsides and into the ditches by passing vehicles, either, because there was no more gravel. Long after the road was paved, a few of the old stones still lay along the roadside, though, and were a reminder of what the road had once been. The blacktop didn't keep the watery shimmer of heat waves from rippling up from its surface, either. That still happened, just like when the road was bright white with gravel. What was different was that, while the sun and heat had only made the gravel and dust hot, they just about melted the blacktop, because the road would get downright soft and spongy by hot July, after a few weeks of sun beating down on it so relentlessly. And the sounds

on the road, the soft crunch of tires on gravel and the occasional hard ping of the stones hitting the metal underneath of cars, were replaced by a gentle *swish swish* as vehicles now rolled effortlessly by on the new, smooth surface. It became very quiet on Marksberry Road.

Marksberry Road was not an important road. What I mean is, it wasn't a main road. Any road that gets you from here to there is important, even a narrow, dirt and gravel, winding road with big ditches on both sides.

The main road was called Route 431, or Livermore Road. It was big enough and important enough to have two names. Technically, it was not really a road but a highway, and a US federal highway at that. It never got a sign like Marksberry Road calling it Livermore Road, but it did have highway markers all along it with the number 431 on them.

Surprisingly, when you thought about it, Route 431 wasn't a whole lot different from Marksberry Road, once you got past the prejudices surrounding the two, and after Marksberry Road got paved. The main differences were that Route 431 was wider (although still narrow for a US federal highway, don't kid yourself), had white lines painted down the middle of it, and shoulders. It had ditches running along both sides, but they weren't nearly as big as the ones along Marksberry Road. Route 431 looked pretty much the same otherwise; it was made of the same blacktop that got soft and spongy in the hot summer, the same material and color, only the shade was lighter between being older and having more traffic, it being the main road. The same thing happened to Marksberry Road later on after some time and traffic even without it being a main road. Route 431 didn't have lights along it, either, any more than Marksberry Road did, and in the black night when there wasn't a moon it was just as dark and dangerous as Marksberry Road. The two had one more thing in common: no speed limit. You could go as fast as you wanted on both roads.

Route 431 was called Livermore Road because it eventually took you to a hamlet of between one and two thousand people called Livermore. I never understood why Livermore. The road didn't end at Livermore; it didn't even end in Kentucky, for that matter, but took you all the way into Tennessee, and no telling how far beyond that. Also, Livermore wasn't the only hamlet or town along the way, or even the biggest. Maybe it was the biggest at one time. It must have been the most important, anyway, to have been picked as an identifying spot along the way.

To make it even more confusing, the road was still called Livermore Road even when it went the other way, north, away from Livermore, and toward the third largest city in Kentucky—Owensboro. I never heard it called the Owensboro Road, or the Ohio River Road, since Owensboro is on the Ohio River. You would think a river was more important than a town or hamlet, especially back then when they named the road, because a river was used for things we now use highways for, like transporting goods and even people. But like I said, no telling what significance Livermore had back then, even over a river. It could have been named after a rich or important person, I guess, but I

never heard that name for a person mentioned.

But that's how people were down there. There was a broken-down old shack that was known as the ol' Fulkerson place. All the years I was growing up and lived down there, that's what it was called—the ol' Fulkerson place. Why, I don't know. No one lived in the house or had lived in it for years, maybe decades, Fulkerson or otherwise. I don't know if Fulkersons owned it, or the land it was on, then or ever. No one seemed to own it. It was literally falling down with weeds practically taking over. My only guess is that the last people to live in the house—or own it—were called Fulkerson, and the name stuck. I often got the feeling that any number of people could have lived in the house after the Fulkersons, and probably did, and it would still have been called the ol' Fulkerson place.

For that matter, I don't know why Marksberry Road was named that. That was another thing the two roads had in common. My guess is that somebody lived on the road, past or present, named Marksberry who had enough importance or significance, like Livermore, to have the road named after him—or her, although realistically I would have to say it was probably a he. Maybe it was the person who first carved the road through, cleared the trees and underbrush, the wilderness. Everything was a wilderness at one time. Then it would have only been a path, or horse and buggy road with ruts, and not really a road, even a dirt and gravel one. Mud when it rained. Or maybe Marksberry was someone who owned the biggest house on the road, or the most land. I don't know because I didn't know anyone named Marksberry when I lived there, or ever even heard the name. But then, I didn't know much anyway, being a kid. I didn't know many people and never went far. Anyway, I only knew where Marksberry Road began; I didn't know where it ended. It ends somewhere, though; it has to.

I do know why the picnic woods, where you turned off the main road to get onto Marksberry Road, were called that—and still are, by the way. It was because of the annual church picnic that used to be held in a clearing in the woods.

It was a small woods, just a little square patch of spindly trees with the road running along one side, a railroad track along another, and fields and a meadow opening up and spreading out on the other two. But it was big enough for the picnic, which was held every year by the Catholic parish in August after the harvest before Labor Day and school started. The picnic was held to raise money for charity and it was a lot of fun. Other churches and parishes did it, too. But the only other church picnic I ever went to was the Stanley picnic, on another road far across the way at opposite corners after I grew up and got married to someone who lived there. But wherever they were held, and whatever parish or church gave them, the picnics were all the same.

The night before the picnic, the men of the parish would clear out any junk and debris that had collected in the woods during the year. They would also clear out some of the thickly tangled weeds between the trees so a person could walk through easier. They would then clean out and re-dig the long, shallow barbecuing trench at one edge of the woods that ran almost the length of one

side of the woods, throwing out the old coals from the year before and refilling it with fresh coals. They would then lay the newly scraped and cleaned small iron grills across the trench, for the length of it, for barbecuing the chicken and pork and mutton. In case you don't know, mutton is mature sheep.

The smoke from the barbecuing made the best smell the next day. All day as the picnic went on, the smoke hovered just above everyone's heads, and that smell lingered and got into everything—clothes, hair, nostrils. We took it home with us, late, after the picnic, and went to sleep with it. It was on our pillows and in our dreams.

But even before the night before, when the men re-dug the trenches and cleared the woods, as early as a week before, the women of the parish peeled vegetables. They would sit around large tables in the basement of the church and fill small tubs with peeled sliced and diced potatoes, sliced and diced carrots and green and red and yellow peppers, and chopped broccoli, okra, and celery. They'd cut corn off the cob, shell peas, and snap beans. When they were finished, there was an array of vegetables and colors that was nothing short of astounding.

The vegetables and colors went into a dish known as burgoo, a type of thick soup. It could be made with chicken or pork or beef, or probably any meat (probably venison, or even bear meat, were used in frontier days, or fish for that matter). Other meat does appear in recipes elsewhere, in cookbooks in cities and so on, but down there only mutton was used as the meat. Mutton not only gave the burgoo its proper taste—a mellow, bitter sweetness—but its proper consistency, as well—a smooth blend of all the ingredients, so that no one single ingredient stood out, with the exception of the corn cut off the cob, which never softened enough to blend smoothly and whose kernels remained separate and floating, like tiny yellow boats, in the soup. The burgoo would cook and stew and simmer the livelong day in a huge, black iron pot like the kind you see in pictures of witches, over a fire built under it with sticks, off to the side of the barbecue pit. Throughout the day, as it gurgled and bubbled, women would come and dip huge ladles of it from the black pot to fill even huger pitchers with it to take to the dining tables for serving. But the burgoo never stopped cooking all day long, not until the last of it had been ladled out. By then, and only then, had the proper consistency been reached. Strange, isn't it, and maybe a shame, too, that not until the burgoo was just about gone did it become its best.

A platform was set up in the center of the clearing for a country music band to play all day and into the night. In front of the platform, on the ground, were laid wooden planks, side by side, to form a dance floor. Along another edge of the woods, leading away from the barbecue trench, were small booths with various entertainments. There was the "Fish Pond," my favorite, where you put a dime or a quarter into a basket attached to a pole and string that you then held over a partition and "fished" with. Someone on the other side of the partition would take the money, then put something in the basket in its place, its worth depending on the amount of money paid—a trick finger pull, a piece of candy, a magnet, a magnifying glass, a whistle in the shape of a bird that you put water in

and when you blew it the bird “warbled.” When the “fisher” boy or girl pulled the basket back over the partition, they would claim their “catch.” Often, you couldn’t tell a nickel’s worth of difference between what was put in the basket for a dime and what was put in for a quarter, even though anyone putting in a quarter should have gotten not one but three nickels’ worth of difference, if my arithmetic is correct. There was a skills booth to test the ability of anyone wanting to knock over bowling pins with balls. The prize—a tiny stuffed animal. There was a fortune teller, of course, a test-your-strength machine, and pie and jelly and jam contests.

The dining area was the last in the circle lining the woods. It was the largest single area, where volunteers set up more wooden planks, this time on sawhorses, to serve as stand-up eating tables. There were rows of them, forming a maze. All day long, people stood and ate, after paying two dollars to the woman who sat at the card table at the entrance, a cigar box full of money at her elbow for making change, and getting a paper “boat” to put their food in. Then women would bring the barbecued mutton and other meats to the diners in small tubs that the men had filled with the meat they had barbecued in large slabs and then sliced or chopped on tables set up along the barbecue pit. Served with the meat were thickly sliced beefsteak tomatoes and sweet white onions, both grown and donated by some of the very people who came to eat it. These sat heaped in more paper boats all along the plank tables, from which the diners helped themselves. There was homemade and store-bought bread, both. A table off to the side held two huge urns of strong black coffee and sweating pitchers of iced tea and lemonade. Another table held the desserts. It displayed a large variety of baked goods, stovetop peach cobbler, and two local favorites, banana fingers (peanut butter and peanuts on long-sliced bananas) and banana pudding.

Behind the burgoo pot was an area for parking and access. Underbrush was cleared just enough for cars and trucks to get in there with food and equipment. A makeshift, low, wire fence was put up to separate it from the rest of the picnic. It was at that fence that I last saw my father alive. He left off chopping mutton to run an errand, climbed over the low wire by the burgoo pot, and never came back.

After Daddy died, we moved off Marksberry Road, but not far away. We moved into the churchhouse on Route 43 I. Mom started keeping house for the minister and we got to live in the churchhouse for free—it went with the job. The churchhouse wasn’t the main house of the church where the minister lived, which was a big white house on a hill near the church and far from the road, but a smaller, darker house below the hill, right on the highway that the church owned.

You could see the picnic woods from the churchhouse, and, even though you couldn’t see Marksberry Road itself, you could see cars and other vehicles go down it, curling up dust in ghostly shimmers of heat waves before it got paved, and then afterward, with the dust gone, their shiny tops flashing in the sun.

As kids, my sister and brothers and I played in the picnic woods on hot

summer days. But we never went far into the woods where I last saw Daddy climb over the fence, but stayed on the nearest side, by the meadow, where the bluegrass grew.

Besides, there were plenty of adventures at the new place to keep us busy. The minister Mom kept house for had a brother who was a candy maker. He used to send the minister free candy, and he'd give it to Mom to give to us kids. I liked the chocolate and pecan turtles the best. There was also a grotto, dug into the hillside beneath the church that we got to play in, a railroad track we put pennies on for the train to flatten, blackberries to pick and sell by the bucketful, and more ponds and lakes to fish and swim in than we could get to. I also got a dog, Rocky, whom I taught to play shortstop at our softball games and also to run bases for me.

And the softball games! We played every day in good weather, me and my brothers and sister and kids we knew. The only bad memory I have is of frail, pale little Willy Mitchell getting hit in the head with the bat one day and killed on the spot. I'll never forget it, how we all stopped playing and stared for a minute and then ran to him and stared again at him lying there in the weeds, crumpled, small, more pale than he ever was, and ever so still.

Rocky's mother, Blacky, was a stray that wandered into our yard one day. Mom made us be careful until we could see if she was mad or not. There were lots of strays back then, and lots of mad dogs. Mad dogs were as common down there as heat and dust, especially by summer's end, in August. I used to tag along after my big brother when he went hunting for mad dogs with the 12-gauge shotgun Mom got him for his birthday after Daddy died. We could see right off that Blacky wasn't mad but big with a litter, so we took her in. She had the pups soon after. We kept Rocky and gave the other five away. Not too long after that, Blacky was killed chasing a bird across Route 431. And then just when he was getting big, Rocky got killed, too, in the same way, on the same road. Mom said they both must have had some bird dog in them.

It was around that time that they put the sign up on Marksberry Road. My sister and I were on our way to the ol' Fulkerson place, where we would go and play "haunted house." We were going down Route 431 and were passing Marksberry Road when we saw the sign. Like I said, it was a shock.

It didn't take long for the shiny new sign to get weathered. And, for some strange reason, for it to get beat up, as well. It was in such an isolated spot, standing in the middle of nowhere, really, where Marksberry Road shot off of Route 431, not crossing the highway but going east only from it, with weed-filled fields all around except for the picnic woods a little ways off there in the "corner." Unless you were looking for Marksberry Road, you'd have to go out of your way to give the sign any attention, especially if you lived around there. Nonetheless, it seemed to be a target for rough boys with guns. At first, the sign just got dirty with the wind and the dust. Yes, there was still dust, even with the paved road, though not so much of it. You're never going to get rid of dust entirely where there's plowing. And, of course, the relentless hot, white sun beat

down on the poor unshaded and exposed thing day in and day out, fading its strange blue color to an even stranger pale and sickly blue. Then, somehow, the sign got bent (maybe the rough boys did that, too) and it began to rust at the bent place. Then, after the boys shot the sign and pockmarked it with BBs and buckshot, the dents and holes began to rust, as well.

It took a while, but not too long, for the sign to become more or less useless, because you couldn't read it anymore. People who lived there knew what it said, of course, but anyone looking for the road, like in the old days before the sign was put up, were no better off. I imagine anyone directing anyone to Marksberry Road would have had to revert to the old directions: Go down Route 431—or Livermore Road—until you get to Brown's Valley, then turn off at the picnic woods. There's a sign, they might add, but you can't read it.

The road, too, got kind of weathered and beat up as time went by. The same wind and dust and sun that got to the sign got to the road, as well, and dimmed the blacktop to gray. And the blacktop began crumbling at the edges, too, turning into what looked a lot like black gravel. I also noticed a pothole or two in the short stretch I could see from 431.

In later years, after I grew up and moved away and got divorced and had the usual things happen to me that happen to everybody and would come back for a visit, I would go out 431 until I got to the road, then turn down it. Of course, I didn't need a sign or directions to take me back. I would marvel at how I myself now knew what it felt like to drive down the road after watching people all my growing up years drive down it and wondering. Past the picnic woods I would go and wind around and past the spot where Daddy's car went into the ditch and on to the little gray cinder block house we lived in then. Yes, it's still there, amazingly. I show it to my own children, grown too now, and they marvel that their mother once lived there.

When we lived there, the little gray house and the land it's on were owned by a man named Miller, whom I never met. He was my father's boss. The whole place—little sharecropper shack, land, and big white house on the hill where the Millers lived—was known as Miller's place. When I visit, I wonder who owns the place now. Things have a way of changing. I don't take it for granted that Millers still own it, even though they could. I haven't asked anyone lately, but I would be willing to bet that, no matter who owns it now, even if it's changed hands several times, since long ago when we lived there, it's still known as Miller's place. I imagine it always will be.

The last time I visited, the sign was gone from Marksberry Road. It had fallen off and lay on the ground at the foot of the pole that once held it, the busy weeds already claiming it. The pole itself, long rusted, stands bent and leaning in the wind and dust. I guess one day I'll go there and it will have fallen over. And one day, sometime after that, it and the sign both will have rusted into the ground and disappeared altogether. I wonder if anyone will put another sign up then, or just let it go?