STOLEN WATER, FORGOTTEN LIBERTIES
A True Story of Life Along Arkansas' South Highway 14 and the Buffalo River

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A True Story of Life Along Arkansas' South Highway 14 and the Buffalo River

JENNY BARNES BUTLER

Dedicated to Rena and Alice,
and all the women who know…
and yet, never give up.

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Introduction

I AM NERVOUS. I simply cannot be in a hurry to tell this story. Sometimes I hurry out of fear—fear that I'll forget a detail or get distracted. I want to breathe and let this story flow. It's a simple story of a common man and a common woman who together lived remarkable lives. And, it's true.

I know for sure that stories are powerful and necessary. And while truth does not need to be proven again, there's always room for one more story. One more story to give someone else hope and a crack of light that energizes them to take one more step. I've chosen to tell this story using significant events that spotlight the development and depth of character of Joe and Willodean (nicknamed "Bill") Barnes. Few would have been able to shape such defeat, hardship, dysfunction, disappointment, and poverty into wealth. Not material wealth necessarily, but life riches. They did.

I am a daughter who wants to tell the story of these two dreadfully poor people, who, with no advantages or support, fell in love and lived irresistibly rich lives. I want the story of Joe and Bill to be enjoyed by their loved ones left behind and added to the memories cherished by all and included wherever God stores stories for our delight in eternity. Then we won't have to sit

around and try to remember because we have this story in black and white. We can read it and laugh and cry and add more details and events as we recall more in heaven. One lifetime was not enough for these two.

When I was twirling a Hula Hoop around my waist for hours in the yard under the giant oak tree in front of what is now Wild Bill's Outfitters (located on South Highway 14 two miles from the Buffalo River in Marion County, Arkansas) I never dreamed or imagined I was the daughter of anyone unusual. I had what is often called a love/hate relationship with my father. I hated the way he treated my sister Shirley, and I was scared of him when he was drinking. But I loved how he loved me.I loved his physical strength, and I loved how people respected and listened to him. I loved how he commanded whatever situation he was in. Even then I was in awe of how my mother loved him.

Growing up I never gave much thought to the place we lived, other than there was absolutely nothing to do living so far out in the country, fourteen miles south of Yellville on Highway 14. Nothing to do but go to the river, or walk to my Grandmother Alice's house, half a mile north on 14, where I'd sit on the porch swing with her, drinking sweet tea and listening to her stories and views on life, which actually, looking back, was Academy-Award-like entertainment. She recited poetry, ballads, scripture, songs; she knew history and loved life. In the summers, my sisters and I were always on the lookout for a *True Story* magazine. I read all of Nancy Drew's books and *The Diary of a Young Girl* no telling how many times. Now I see what a gift the

Buffalo was to the whole community, without which southern Marion County would have been a wasteland of rolling Ozark hills covered with dusty apple-size rocks, plus back road after back road of billowing dust or sticky red clay mud, depending on the weather.

But the Buffalo gave us life. She birthed good and bad for many. Jimmy and Paul Ray Dillard (from the Dillard family who grew up on the river) would sit on a bluff near Tie Chute Hole with guns waiting to toy and torment fishermen as they floated down. No telling what else they did. At South Maumee, where pioneers settling close by crossed the Buffalo to get to Marshall, a young mother drowned as she was swept out of the family wagon away from her children as they crossed during high water. My older sister Shirley saved my younger sister Justine as she panicked trying to swim to the center of the river where the trusty refuge boulder waited.

The Buffalo gave us a respite. A place to be still and let go and remember what is important and what is not. She fed us the best catfish and bass, entertained us, and gave us an altar to worship. She shaped our lives as we floated, fished, trot lined, canoed, swam, made out with boyfriends, sang, played music, wrote songs and poetry, sat around campfires, hauled canoes, worked on guided fishing trips, and dreamed dreams. She gave us a hand to part the ice blue clouds and see the face of the creator. The Buffalo River connected the community, and for years on the lower forty miles of the river, Joe and Willodean Barnes, two nobodies from nowhere, made a difference.

In l972 the Buffalo became the first designated "national river" after years of fighting between different factions. Some wanted to dam it in two places: the first one being above Lone Rock a few miles up from where it runs into the White River; the second place above Gilbert. Others wanted it to become government property so they could protect it and manage it. Then, some wanted everyone to just leave it alone and let the landowners take care of it the way they had for years. Much has already been written about the different factions and groups that grew out of this battle.

However, this is not a story about the battle over the Buffalo becoming a national river. This is a story that has never been told. The river and what happened to the land along it is the showcase that holds the account of Joe Barnes, an uneducated but colorful, damaged but commanding, leader in a community at a time when he was the one others trusted. He was the one people came to for answers. He knew what would work and what wouldn't. And, he was swayed by no one and nothing except by what was right. He knew that he would lose the battle to keep the river from becoming government held, but that didn't stop him from fighting with the other canoe operators along the river for the freedom to control their own livelihood through their businesses and their own property. This situation was virgin territory for the government. Always before, when they took land for parks and controlled the businesses, they owned the land where the business was. Not so in this case. They would be regulating businesses off government property.

When the Department of the Interior took over all the land along the 135-mile river (except Gilbert, which was incorporated as a city) in l972, it took years for them to settle with the property owners. They started at the headwaters and worked their way down, negotiating and forcing people to sell. Next, they began to regulate who could be on the river, who could have a business using the river, and the rules and regulations they would have to follow.

In November of 1978, forty-four Buffalo River canoe operators received a letter in the mail informing them of a date for a meeting in Harrison to discuss how they could apply for a permit if they wanted to continue using the Buffalo.

"The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places," Ernest Hemingway writes in *A Farewell To Arms*. "But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry." Joe Barnes's destiny was one of struggle his whole life; unlike many he became stronger in the broken places. He made a difference.

This is his story. He did not write down anything, except how much money he had and where he left it. But he told me stories and I wrote them down. He told me about Rena, his mother, and called her "an orphan." He told me about his father losing his farm because he couldn't pay the $500.00 note due at the bank. He told me about meeting the beautiful Willodean and walking to Marshall to buy her a wedding

dress. He told me about the Battle of St. Lo and going for ninety days without changing clothes when he was in France in WWII. I wrote his stories down, knowing I'd someday use them. He once told me after he read *Lonesome Dove*: "I don't know why someone in our family don't write a damn book." He thought we were educated idiots, for the most part, I suppose. All four of his girls graduated from college; three have master's degrees. Sure, he was proud of his girls and their educations, but "An education does not a smart person make," he was quick to relay.

Over the years, I kept hearing Joe's voice in my head and it had to come out the way I heard it. For that reason, the first and the last two chapters of this story are in Joe's voice, the way he said things, the way I wrote his stories down, the way I heard him speak. The Buffalo River gave Joe Barnes a place to leave a legacy few men have.

Chapter One

A CANOE RENTAL AT HIGHWAY 14 BRIDGE

(IN THE WORDS OF JOE BARNES)

I BOUGHT THIS HERE LAND under the bridge in 1969. A man named Mr. Davis from Alaska come in here and started rentin' a few canoes and boats to people who didn't have 'em. He'd bought the land from Pate Dillard, who built and ran the ferry across the Buffalo before the bridge was built. Then Ira, Pate's brother, ran the ferry for years, chargin' fifty cents a car. They's a lot of history right here at this bridge. Stuff people ain't he'rd.

The land came with eleven old canoes, four leaky Johnboats and four old good-for-not-much cabins. I didn't know if I could run a business. Never had run a business. Didn't know if I'd like it. 'Course I'd done a lot I hadn't liked. 'Bout all I knew was I was sick and tar'd of bein' away from Bill and the girls and livin' away from home. Tar'd a livin' in one room, boardin' in other people's homes while workin' on a lock or a dam for a few months.

I'd been runnin' around all over this United States workin' on locks and dams, from the St. Lawrence

Seaway to the Arkansas River system of locks and dams. The first dam I worked on was Bull Shoals, not long after I came home from the war. I didn't know much of anythin' 'bout carpenter work then. Knew so little I jest quit one day when the boss told me to go build a couple saw horses. Never forgit that day. I could hammer a nail, 'bout all I could do. Hadn't been there long when the boss jest up and said, "Joe go build us a couple saw horses so we can work on these forms over here." I was pretty bumfuzzled over that, but I tried and tried…then got mad and frustrated, exploded, threw down my hammer. Ended up jest leavin', packed up my stuff and jest left, quit and went home.

Once I got home, I couldn't rest. I drew some saw horses on a sheet of paper, got my tools out and it weren't long 'til I had cobbled out some semblance of saw horses. They weren't very purty. Few days later, I decided to load 'em on my truck and go see if they'd give me my job back. They hired me on the spot. I reckon they needed help bad or I was a fast learner and they wanted to keep me. Maybe both. Carpenter work suited me. I could see in my mind a picture of how things was supposed to work. I liked drawin' it out. At night when I was home, I'd sit and figure in my head and scribble and draw and sketch it out on paper. I was slow—but I could do math and I liked comin' up with the answers. I went to my jobs early to git ready for the day's work and I'd stay late. It weren't long 'til I moved up the ladder from carpenter to runnin' a crew as a foreman and then they put me over crews as a superintendent. I'd have to take the blueprints home and

see that we stuck with the plan. I made damn good money. But jobs didn't last forever and I'd git restless and move from one good job to another, thinkin' somehow it would pay better or last longer. Guess the grass always looked greener. Me and Bill both would git to missin' home. When I finished a job, off we'd go to a new town or a new state, or maybe back to South Highway 14 where our little cracker-box house always set and waited on us.

We moved four times the year Jenny was in the first grade. Hell, I don't even remember why. Bill and the girls didn't think that much 'bout it, I don't reckon. Jest did it. Guess I jest got restless again. Restless or frantic, always lookin' for somethin' better, maybe longer, or higher payin'. Guess I never got over bein' raised in the Depression when I saw Momma and Daddy exhausted, worried sick 'bout whether or not they's gonna be able to feed us five growin' boys. I was searchin' for somethin' safe, I reckon. The last dam I was on was the Lock at Dardanelle with the Arkansas Lock and Dam System—'bout 1968, I reckon.

I knew a little 'bout the Buffalo River. There wasn't too much to know, I reckon. Most of all I knew to be careful when she's on a rise and especially when campin' overnight on a gravel bar. If it rained much up stream, next mornin' you'd wake up floatin' down river, if you slept on a raft. It doesn't take long for the river to creep up the gravel bar and take over durin' a flood.

Jimmy Dillard, one of Bill's cousins, was a good one to trot line and fish the river. People used to tell he

could catch a catfish with his bare hands. We'd tie a line on one side of the river like we was puttin' up a clothesline and then drop shorter lines off it with hooks at the end, 'bout eighteen inches long or so every two feet. We'd bait each drop line as we stretched the main trot line all the way across the river.

Seinin' the river for bait was half the fun. Usually did that the night before and would have minnow buckets full of crawdads, perch, minnows, whatever we could use as live bait. Stink bait worked good too. Had to use anchors, like big heavy rocks to keep the lines under water after they were baited. Also kept big fish from runnin' off with the whole shebang. We'd git all this done right before dark and then sleep on the river bank. We'd tie cow bells ever 6 feet or so on the line. When we he'rd the bells ringin', we knew we had a fish. We'd be up, off an on, all night runnin' them lines, takin' the fish or snakes or eels off the lines and rebaitin' them. We'd catch a tub full of catfish!

Naturally, I was leery of runnin' a business since I hadn't ever run anythin' near like it before. A crew of carpenters is 'bout it. I was sure my ways weren't real well suited to customer service. Hell, I knew I was barely educated. A'int no dummy either. I can tell you one thing, by God, I'm a hell of a lot smarter than a lot of college graduates I've known. I was not known as a patient man either, to put it simply. And, to be honest, I knew I had a drinkin' problem that could interfere with business. 'Bout the only time I talked 'bout the drinkin' was when Bill and I had a blowup after I'd been on a binge. I'd go for months without touchin' a

thing, then I'd git down an out and find somethin' to drink and then I had a hard time stoppin'. Comin' off a binge is a terrible feelin'. Damn!

We'd built Bill's grocery store in l959, a mile up the hill from the bridge. It made damn good money for Marion County. I figured I could come out okay too—if I worked hard and put everythin' back in the business. I did know you can't spend your profit and makin' it would take hard work. 'Bout all I ever knew was hard work.

I hated to go in debt and I was stallin' 'bout buyin' at first. Bill insisted. "The land alone is worth what they are askin'," she kept sayin'.

"But, everything we have is paid for!" I argued back, "Our forty acres on top of the hill, the cracker box house, the store, vehicles, and even a little money stashed away." But she won. I bought early in l969, like I said. I was tar'd of leavin' home. Besides, if Bill was for it, that meant a lot to me. She had a lot of sense, common sense.

I'm tellin' you my first spring and summer rentin' canoes and Johnboats I could hardly keep up. That's the damn truth! I saw right away overnight guided trips was gonna be the money makers. You start addin' up the boat, motor, guide, food, tents, sleepin' bags, fishin' supplies, times the number of people and it adds up fast. But tourists who want a relaxin' few days away from city life were willin' to pay. Didn't take long for news to travel by word of mouth that we were the place to go for guided trips.

If a customer wanted to catch a fish, I had to have a good guide. Lots of good food and a comfortable dry bed at night on the river bank helped, but a good guide could make or break any trip.

The best guide I ever knew of on the Buffalo was a man named Robert Baysinger. Ole Robert was known as quite the "mountain man." He was quiet spoken and a nice appearin' man. He could catch a fish anywhere, anytime, anyplace.

"There's a difference in a Yellow Cat and a Channel Catfish," Robert claimed. "A Yellow Cat has a home—under and around rocks and boulders. His tail sweeps them clean of brush and film so the rocks'll be nice and smooth—sometimes shiny." Seemed like he knew the fish like they was his family. I'm a tellin' you the truth.

Robert was raised on the lower end of the river. His dad, Ike Baysinger, was a logger and a farmer. He raised a lot of corn in a big field above the Highway 14 Bridge, between where Water Creek runs into the Buffalo and farther up, a place locals call Tie Chute Hole. I don't have any idée how far Robert went in school. He was smart and strong built. His kin was a pretty rough bunch of folk, I've he'rd. Moonshine business made you purty tough. Robert had a purty sister, Imogene, who married a cousin of Bill's, Paul Ray Dillard, from the Dillard bunch of Doc and Lizzie. Paul Ray was Jimmy's brother. His daddy was Ira, who run the ferry back n forth across the river. Their mother Meta was the tightest woman I ever he'rd of—she was so tight she rationed their food. Jimmy was

a mean son of a bitch, I'ma tellin' ya and strong as a bull. I he'rd he ended up in California. Someone found him dead in a ditch out there. All these guys raised up fishin' on the Buffalo. They did lots of giggin' and trot linin' and spotlightin', not jest fishin'. Hell, these boys didn't grow up playin' baseball; they grew up on the Buffalo.

I had other good guides besides Robert in those early years of Barnes Canoe Rental. Jim Ward, who had 14 kids, worked for me for years. Bill worried herself sick 'bout those kids havin' e'nuff warm clothes and food. They lived down here in Big Bell Holler down on the park road on the other side of Dirst. Jim's wife, Donna, was a full blood Indian.

Jackie and Jimmy Morison were brothers from Marshall. Lord, what a pair those two were. Jimmy was with me one time we rescued a woman up the river in a terrible rainstorm. She was stuck, her legs trapped under the canoe seat when it folded like aluminum foil wrappin' around a tree. Water was up to her chin when we found her. 'Bout didn't git her out. Bill always wanted me to write that story and send it to *Reader's Digest*. Hell, I can't write. I can tell a story, but I can't write it. Remember I quit school in 'bout the fourth grade. Taught myself to read and write. She's the book smart one. She should'a wrote it.

Jackie didn't drink and didn't like to be round anyone who did drink. He's a fine guy. Hardworkin'. Honest. Danny Earl Tilley was from over across the river near or in the Nat'l Forest somewhere. Big guy, like a mountain man. Gary and Nancy Doskel worked

for me cleanin' cabins and doin' office work and jest whatever needed to be done. They all was good help. I was lucky to have em. They were dependable. I had one woman worked for me who only had a few teeth. Can't remember her name. Hard worker, and clean but jest looked bad without many teeth.

I was keepin' ole Matt, my grandson, one weekend down at the bridge. Not sure where his momma, Jenny, was. Matt loved it at the bridge. Hell, all kids loved it down there. Who wouldn't? I jest let him go, runnin' free and wild. Told him not to go past his knees in the water without me with him. He minded pretty good—he wasn't much over three or four. I was sittin' on the porch with my cleanin' lady that Saturday, late in the afternoon. She was eatin' a tall Eskimo Pie. Matt walked up from the river and stood at the edge of the porch starin' at that ice cream. Before I could go buy him one, she stuck hers toward him to share it with him. He took a big lick and ice cream dripped off his chin. She took a lick, and offered him another lick. He licked again. Damn! I thought I'd die watchin' him lickin' off her ice cream. It didn't kill him, but it 'bout killed me.

My help was dependable. They weren't no college graduates. They knew how to work and appreciated the work. They weren't too goody good to git their hands dirty or stay late or pick up someone else's trash. I reckon I was the one that gave me the most trouble. I jest got to wantin' a drink ever once in a while, that burnin' sensation flooddin' my veins triggered me not carin' 'bout much—wasn't much rhyme or reason to

the way I drank. Some days I started early and drank a little all day. Some evenin's I drank straight vodka and tried to drink away the aches and emptiness. Some mornin's I felt rough, I can tell you for sure. I looked rough too. But, the show went on. Customers wanted to float. They tolerated the rough way I'd look, a beard, clothes been slept in. My help stepped in and picked up the slack. Didn't seem to hurt business, but back then there weren't that many places to rent a canoe. Hard to be too picky. But people absolutely began to flock to the Buffalo. I never seen anythin' like it.

The battle over the Buffalo was in the news 'bout ever damn day, seemed like. Always some new somethin' abrewin' 'bout whether to dam it or make it a Nat'l River. People in little groups fightin' over it like it was their only child someone tryin' to kidnap.

Prob'ly, the best way to 'splain the battle is this: They was two main groups of people. One was the tree huggers who wanted the gov'ment to step in and make the river like a national park all the way up and down the 135-mile river along with the land on either side and the gov'ment control it all to protect it. Most locals didn't want the damn gov'ment comin' in here tellin' us what we could and couldn't do with our land. Most locals that is.

Over round Marshall it was a different story. They wanted a dam above Gilbert 'cause a dam would bring in more tourists and mean more business for them, like it is over at Bull Shoals Lake since they dammed the White River. These pro-dam folks organized earlier in 'bout l962 and formed the Buffalo River Im-

provement Association (BRIA). They was jest a group of business folks who saw the commercial benefits over round Marshall that wanted both dams—the one at Lone Rock above the mouth of the Buffalo three or four miles and the one right above Gilbert. They was pushin' and arguin' the dams would help with electrical power, water conservation and help with tourism and industry. They were okay with a national river but wanted it upstream from the Gilbert dam. I reckon the tree huggin' group decided they didn't want no half a river. They kept fightin' for the whole river to be made national river.

I been told the first meetin' between the two in this war was called by the Corps of Engineers in Marshall early in l962—the outcome was a clear victory for the pro-dam folks. But I he'rd that was when Neil Compton's bunch figured out theys gonna havta git busy.

Then, in April of that same year, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas floated the Buffalo for several days with a group of dam opponents. Afterwards, he became vocal 'bout his favorin' the preservation of the river as a national river. He was quoted as sayin', "This river is too beautiful to die."

A month or so after Douglas's visit, other preservation proponents, who knew 'bout the BRIA recent meetin' in Marshall and pickin' up steam, gathered at the University of Arkansas campus and ended up establishin' the Ozark Society headed up by Dr. Neil Compton and Mrs. Laird Archer. Their objective was "the preservation of the Buffalo River and adjacent

areas in their natural state." Anyway, that's what I he'rd.

A course I was still roamin' all over the country then 'bout l962. So I've jest read and he'rd 'bout some of these doings. But then, after I bought in l969, it weren't but a couple years 'til I could hardly keep up with my business. I jest kept buyin' more canoes and more vans and trucks and trailers to haul them in. Hirin' more people to work. Ever canoe would be rented on weekends we had decent weather.

Local and national news coverage of the battle over the Buffalo made people curious what all the fuss was 'bout, I reckon. Newspapers, magazines and TV all seemed to follow the story. We had people comin' in here from 'bout every state in the United States.

I knew, a course, 'bout the battle to make it a national river when I bought, but no one really knew how it would fall for sure. I mostly jest wanted them all to go home and leave us the hell alone. I reckoned it would happen sometime though. The gov'ment wasn't gonna jest let the river be.

Seemed like the fight was goin' to go on forever. David Pryor (senator from Arkansas l979-1997) came and wanted me to show him the river and how all the canoe haulers worked. So did Faubus (governor of Arkansas, l955-l967).

Like I said, business was good. People came in here from all over to float the Buffalo, city slickers, rich, poor. Lots of businesses brought groups of their people, like the Arkansas Razorback football team, the Case Knife Company. Some knew how to paddle. Some

didn't. Some would, honest to God, git in a canoe, and start paddlin' up the river. Damn! Can you imagine? I'm a tellin' you the truth.

But people came from Louisiana, Mississippi, and a lot from Texas. Some stayed, camped out for months in the park and here at my place in the summer. Some customers would not do a damn thing I told 'em to do. Others couldn't do e'nuf for you—when it came to takin' care of canoes, paddles and all like they was their own.

Runnin' the business became long hours and hard work. Durin' the canoein' season, April, May, June, July, August and September, I'd sleep in my office buildin' next to the bridge on the weekends. Customers called or stopped by all hours of the day and night. If I was here, I didn't miss any business. I knew to make hay while the sun shined. I kept the good-for-not-much cabins clean and they stayed rented. Families came to vacation or spend a day swimmin' in the river, picnickin' or jest playin'. Others wanted long, serious overnight, fishin' trips. Bill used to say regularly, "My myyyyy—HOW people love that river—--should be a song." Damn.

I reckon I took on a different kind of way dealin' with customers. Some people have said a "style." Basically, I didn't take any shit off no one. But, I tried hard to give people their money's worth and see to it they was safe on the river and had a chance to have fun. Some things I jest could not tolerate.

Makin exceptions for people is one of 'em and waitin' on people is another. If I told a person the time

to git picked up after a float was four o'clock, by God I meant four o'clock. I ain't waitin' round an hour while they deedaddle around and play and take their good ole pokey time gitgittin' there. Rules are rules, by God and I'll run my business the way I want. If someone don't like it they can go somewheres else and rent a damn canoe. Fine with me.

The first time Mike Mills came to visit the lower end of the Buffalo, I was standin' outside on the porch talkin' to a new customer. I usually wore blue jeans, cowboy boots, a white shirt, and a ball cap cocked to one side. That's jest what I was comfortable in and it washed good. Haulin' canoes can be dirty work. The customer and Mike reached the porch at 'bout the same time.

"Are you Mr. Barnes?

"That's me," I told him.

"Can we rent a canoe and float down the river from here?"

"Sure can. You can put in here and float down to the state park, take you 'bout an hour, or you can go on to Rush, 'bout a ten mile float, five or six hours, depends on how fast you paddle. We will have a truck there to pick you up and bring you back to your car. Jest up to you on how long you want to be on the river."

Well, they hum hawed around, talked 'bout food, tryin' to decide what to do. All the while Mike was waitin' on 'em, tryin' not to butt in.

"How will we know where to take out of the water?" they asked.

"They's a big iron cable stretched high from one side of the river to another, right before you git to Rush. Used to be a cable car that crossed there when Rush was a boomin' zinc mine town."

"What do we do if your driver and truck aren't there?"

"My driver will be there," I told 'em, losin' my patience.

"What if we aren't there yet by 4 o'clock?" he asked.

"By God, if you aren't there by 4 o'clock, you'll have to walk the ten miles back to your car," I told 'em and finished that conversation.

Later, ole Mike told me that day he knew he'd found a style of dealin' with customers. Kinda funny, I reckon. Mike had been in graduate school at Fayetteville when he first floated the Buffalo and fell in love with it. Soon he dropped out and bought the canoe business at Ponca and changed the business' name to Buffalo Outdoor Center.

I've he'rd Mike tells this story on me. Uses it as a model for how he wanted to deal with people and run his business.

A few years after the law passed makin' it a national river in l972, but before the government takeover of our land, seemed like they was always somethin' excitin' or important happenin' at the river. River was floodin'. River was too low to float without draggin' a canoe, dryin' up from no rain. Someone drownin' in an accident, a car wreck on the river hill. People was riled up over the government forcin' us to sell our land and not jest that but them takin' over and tellin' us what

we could do and what we couldn't do. Most of all, forcin' us to move off our land along the river. People who'd had this land in their family for generations.

Weren't never dull around here for long with Bill runnin' the grocery store and all that bunch of her family, the Smiths comin' around and then there's all the Dillards too. Frankly, I never cared much for hullabaloo, but didn't have no choice lots of the time. Winters was slow, but early in the year, people started callin' and bookin' trips, cabins, canoes. I kept a poster size, homemade, calendar beside my recliner in the livin' room to schedule for cabins and float trips and canoes. Early, in March I believe, 1976, the *National Geographic* Society contacted me 'bout one of their people comin' to float the Buffalo. They wanted to canoe the total 135 miles of the river and they would write up a story for the magazine. I reckon everyone knew 'bout N*ational Geographic*. Right away, I perked up and knew this would be an important story for the river, all of us canoe haulers and businesses up and down it.

The canoe haulers, U.D. Lynch, Leon Dodd, Dirst and Joe Bennet, didn't max out their capacity or rent all their canoes very often, exceptin' for holiday weekends like Memorial Day, the 4th of July or Labor Day. This set me to figurin', means I went to my recliner, looked at my calendar, startin' circlin' my thumbs with balls of fingers on each hand, chewin' tobacco. I'd stretch out my size twelve cowboy boots, legs stickin' straight out from my recliner, leanin' back, in meditatin' position.

Called 'em back. Told 'em I could handle from Pruitt down to the mouth. I didn't want any part of Ponca to Pruitt, which can be pretty treacherous in the spring if they's high water. They was other good outfitters up there knew better what was goin' on up there. They could keep floaters safe and informed of the river levels and the weather. Hell, Ponca is 100 miles or more up the river from me. Can be lots of white water up there in April when we'd be makin' this trip. Can't remember if Mike Mills had bought the place at Ponca yet or not. Believe he had.

National Geographic folks wanted a good guide and someone to handle the commissary boat. The guide would be the person who knew the river's twists and turns. He'd set up camp on a gravel bar, put up tents, cots, make a fire and either do the cookin' or help the cook if they'd hired one. He'd help them fish or do whatever they wanted.

"I'll git you the best guide ever been on this river," I told them. I set to figurin' how I'd git Robert Baysinger to make this trip. I'd he'rd some rumors recently 'bout a murder happened in Marshall, 'bout thirty miles away. Billy Joe Holder was the man's name. He worked for the Arkansas Beverage Control, but before that he'd been the youngest sheriff ever in Marshall for years. People seemed to either really like him or really hate him. I didn't know the man. His reputation was bein' a hardass on moonshiners and Marshall was a dry county. Holder was tough and held his ground. Somebody shot him late in January that year, I believe. People was sayin' Robert Baysinger was in on it.

Hell's bells, I didn't believe Robert Baysinger could shoot nobody. Jest couldn't believe it. Robert was a gentle soul, although he was a tough old coot too. He was backwoods, hill country, but he wasn't a murderer. He'd made moonshine for years. I'd drunk some of it. Last I'd seen him, he seemed pretty down and out 'bout it all, but as far as I knew no one had been arrested yet. And, I didn't believe it anyway. *National Geographic* wouldn't know 'bout these rumors. They jest needed a guide. I needed him. If I was goin' to give *National Geographic* the best trip they could git to be written down and recorded and read by many for years, it'd be a cryin' shame not to use Robert.

It was a cold March mornin'. I drank my coffee, pulled on my boots, got my hat and coat and left early to drive over to Harriett to find where Robert lived. I didn't call him. He'd be up. I didn't figure he'd been strayin' too far from home with all the rumors flyin' round 'bout the murder. People, even locals, might be leery of anyone in the bootleggin' circle, especially if the rumor is he may have shot the sheriff. Damn!

Turnin' off the paved highway onto the dirt road, I drove through the tree lined lane and shortly pulled my truck within a few yards of Robert's front porch. Not quite daylight, I saw a faint light inside and then saw movement by a curtain over the picture window. Standin' on Robert's front porch, I could see miles and miles of rollin' Ozark Mountains. A purty place. I knocked.

He opened the front door and motioned me inside. With a warm grin and outstretched hand, we shook

while he pulled me inside. We drank coffee and shot the bull awhile. Then I told him why I come. "I got a big float trip comin' up for the *National Geographic* magazine," I told him. "It will give the river a lot of good attention and advertisement if we make it fun and safe." "By God, Robert, I told 'em I'd git the best guide ever was or ever will be on the Buffalo; you're that one."

"Now Robert, I know they's some serious rumors flyin' 'round 'bout you bein' involved in the Billy Joe Holder case, but I don't believe 'em for one single minute."

"Joe, what on earth people gonna thank 'bout you hiring a suspect in this case? What'll people say 'bout you and your business?" Tears rolled down his face.

"Robert, I don't give a DAMN what people say!"

National Geographic didn't publish the article for 'bout a year, March of '77. Course we all 'bout forgot all 'bout it by then. Here's how the journalist, Harvey Arden, started out:

> OUT IN THE DOWN-HOME HILLS of the Arkansas Ozarks runs a 135-mile wriggle of near wilderness that maps call the Buffalo River and local folks call just "Buf'lo." Kicking its white-water heels through sparsely populated hills as tough and worn as a farmer's overalls, this frisky calf of a stream—one of a dwindling number of un-

> dammed rivers in the eastern half of the United States—was set aside by Congress in l972 to run forever free as America's first officially designated "national river."

The pictures in the article are as good as any I ever seen, Hemmed-in-Holler, white water rapids, bluffs, Gilbert General Store, people in canoes, Granny Eva Barnes Henderson who at 83 years old had to move from home. When asked 'bout the new national river, which would make us owners have to move outside the park boundaries, she said, "Moving out o' here would mean giving up all I've got, all I ever had." She died less than a year after she was forced to move from her home. One other local person was mentioned and that was Fred Dirst at Rush who told them 'bout the zinc mines and the town when it was boomin'.

Was it a good story 'bout the Buffalo? Yes, I'm sure it was. Did it capture the flavor of what it's like to float? Maybe, maybe not. Did it give history and tell 'bout the battle over dammin' it or the government regulatin' it? Some. Did it reflect a poetic romance with the river? Seemed so.

Jest seemed like somethin' missin' to me, maybe like a description you'd hear of Disneyland—or some kind of fantasy. I didn't hear the heartbeat of the river like you did in the letter Faubus wrote askin' the river be left alone.

Robert tells his version of floating the Buffalo with the group of people including the *National Geographic* team:

> At Pruitt, I joined Mr. Arden, his wife, Lorraine, and their two children, six and three, and his sister-in-law, Mary Kimley, and her three children, ages fifteen, fourteen, and ten, after they'd been on the river two days coming down from Ponca.
>
> Seemed like all they brought to eat was what I call hippie food. They'd get out a bowl and add nuts and fruit and mix it all up. Joe Barnes was known for the good meals he provided on overnight trips. For one-night trips they were usually a big thick rib eye or a T-bone steak with baked potatoes, peaches on a bed of lettuce, and corn on the cob. But Joe hadn't provided food for this trip, just a guide. I guess after two days they'd run out of most meal stuff cause I couldn't look at no more of that hippie stuff. I needed some food! When we got close to the Highway 65 Bridge and took a break, I spotted some big rocks I thought might be hiding some catfish. I'd brought my Rouge gig. Wasn't long 'til I'd gigged two catfish around 5 pounds each. I cleaned them and put em in the cooler. Then, right around the bend was a game warden. His name was Darrell Tucker. We stopped and talked. He saw the fish and the gig but didn't say a word. I's sho'r proud of that.

I was a starving to death by the time we got to Gilbert. I left the boat on the gravel bar, walked up to the Gilbert General Store. I bought corn meal, potatoes and shortening. Later that night, when we made camp, I fried up that catfish, cooked fried potatoes and made golden brown hush puppies. No more hippie food for awhile. They wasn't one bite left over. Think they enjoyed something besides hippie food themselves.

A couple days later, further down the river, we got close to Rush. I was starting to get hungry for something hearty again and thought I'd try my hand at gathering up more food rather than suffer through the hippie menu. This time I caught a ten pound catfish in the Silver Holler Hole close to Rush. When I was getting ready to fry it, someone asked me if I had anything to go with it. We were out of potatoes. I started looking around and saw a nice patch of Poke Salad. I cut off the tops, chopped up the stalks, rolled 'em in corn meal and served another tasty meal on the river bank. No leftovers again.

The evenin' after this trip was over, Robert Baysinger and Leon Dodd spent the evenin' at Robert's house

drinkin' and shootin' the bull. The next mornin', a sheriff from Marshall knocked on Robert's door and arrested him for the murder of Billy Joe Holder. Another story. A longer story.

After the government forced me to sell my property at the bridge, I moved my business on top of the river hill. That was in 1980. Robert had been in the pen 'bout a year. After a retrial, he was released. His earlier conviction was overturned. Another story. But after awhile, he started workin' for me again. He worked in the office answerin' the phone some, hauled canoes, and still guided on fishin' overnight trips. Bill worked across the road. She kept a close eye on me then. I was still bad to drink. I know I was. I wish I could take it back but I can't. At times I'd git mean. Nothin' would make me stop lookin' for a fight.

She would call up at the canoe office and ask for Robert. She thought he'd tell her the truth. "Is Joe a drinking today?" she'd ask. Robert would say somethin' like, "He may have had a beer or two." He never told her too much detail.

After a big rain, the river would rise and turn muddy and flood. When I could see we were fixin' to lose every single rental of the 165 canoes I now had, I'd send someone to Cotter for a case or two of beer, some Jack Daniels whiskey and tell Robert to git a johnboat ready.

We'd put a ten horse motor on the back of a boat, load it up and be sure we had a jacket of some kind. The river gits cool in the evenin's. Somethin' 'bout motorin' up that river—leavin' civilization—hearin' the hum of the motor, the boat cuttin' through the

water, the splash of nature in my face that made me breathe deep and wonder if maybe I hadn't done somethin' good—somethin' worthwhile with the deck of cards God dealt me. I'm not sure. I did wonder.

Robert could be trusted to run the boat and motor, no matter how big the river flooded or how muddy or how many trees or cows were floatin' in it. Worries and troubles rolled off my back the further we motored up. I'd forgit all 'bout the $3,000 or $4,000 of business I was losin' that weekend and all my employees workin' for me losin' their pay when I had to send 'em home.

Yes I'd git sloppy drunk at times, but "I never seen him when he couldn't run his business," I overheard Robert tell someone. And, I always knew Robert wasn't goin' to "tattle" to Bill.