

Pure Poison!

By Charles David Head

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Hogjaw Valley is situated in the northeastern corner of Jackson County, Alabama, and meanders for a distance of four miles between Sand Mountain and the Tennessee River, from Bridgeport, Alabama to the outskirts of New Hope, Tennessee.

How the pristine valley got its unique name isn't clear, but it's retained that name for more than 150 years. Its beauty notwithstanding, Hogjaw Valley has the unwanted distinction of being one of the most dangerous places in the state in which to live. No less than 25 of the rural area's 300 residents have been murdered since the late 1960s and many of the slayings have gone unsolved to this day.

Several smaller valleys fan out from Hogjaw, with most being settled and farmed during the mid-19th Century. An abundance of fresh water springs provided an everlasting source of drinking water for settlers and livestock. The Hembree and Gentry families chose one of these valleys in which to put down their roots in 1857 and their descendants still live on the family farm sitting adjacent to Island Creek Cove to this day.

Island Creek empties into the Tennessee River on one side and on the other is the sleepy little town of Bridgeport, Alabama.

Tucked between the Hembree farm and Island Creek is another valley of about 300 acres splayed out in the shape of a demijohn. With the exception of two mobile homes sitting as sentinels on each side of the dirt road leading through the valley's narrow neck, the entire area is devoid of inhabitants.

Having never been in this particular valley, I nonetheless was aware that several old home places lay within its borders, having been told about them by George White, an old friend who once drove a tractor for the family who leased the valley and farmed the land.

George also recalled that back in the 1950s, the valley was used on the sly as a "chopshop." Vehicles would be stolen and driven into the secluded valley at night. There they would be stripped and gutted and what was left would be pushed into a previously prepared deep ditch, then covered up. Once that was done, the area looked like the rest of the farmland.

Had the county sheriff ever been tipped off, he would have had to dig up nearly the entire valley to get evidence on the car theft ring. However, George said, the sheriff never got that tip and the chopshop operated unhindered for a decade before its entrepreneur discovered a more lucrative sideline of "herbal gardening."

After driving past the valley's mouth for two decades and knowing that somewhere within its borders were several old house places, each with the potential of having antique bottles there for the

taking, I decided to explore the valley.

Knowing the area's history and the macabre way many of its residents departed this life for the hereafter, I decided to enter the valley by an indirect route. Nobody I asked seemed to know who owned the property, or if they knew, weren't telling. So permission or not, I decided to go and take Cousin Billy with me.

On a mid-November 2001 frosty morning, I parked my pickup truck about a half-mile from the valley's entrance along the shoulder of the two-lane, blacktop road. Cousin Billy and I crossed the lower end of a mountain abutting the property and had to move even farther away from the valley's entrance because of a steep bluff. Doing so also enabled us to keep our scents away from an attentive black-and-tan hound I saw sitting on the rudiments of a front porch of the longest house trailer.

Crossing the brow of the mountain, it was easy to see why this virgin forest of white oak, red oak, hickory and yellow poplar had never been cut. Indeed, we were traveling through some rough country. Sink holes and limestone boulders, the latter the size of an SUV, joined enough immense slabs of granite to build 10,000 courthouses.

Once we reached the mountaintop and started down the other side, the timber and rocks got smaller and the going much easier. Along the way, Cousin Billy and I had seen numerous deer, which were warned of our approach by the barks of gray squirrels high above our heads in the vibrant fall foliage colors of orange, red, purple and yellow. When we reached the foot of the mountain, a lush valley opened up before us. Much of it was being used as crop land.

It was our plan to move in a circular route along the edge of the valley in order to locate any old home places hidden away in any of the valley's numerous hollows and eventually come back to the spot where we were standing. Question was, go left or right?

Using my binoculars, I scanned the edge of the valley, detecting movement to my far right. I thought it was a pony grazing along the edge of Island Creek, but was surprised to learn it was a big German shepherd. It was followed by an older man dressed in bluejeans, a plaid shirt and straw hat. I let Cousin Billy take a gander at Rin-Tin-Tin and he quickly agreed that it probably would be best if we started our tour by going left.

Making our way through the trees along





the valley's rim, we began to notice many deer stands had been built in the sturdiest trees at 75-yard intervals. I eventually lost count once I got past 50. Cousin Billy and I were astonished by the high number since any given day of deer season would have required hundreds of hunters and thousands of deer. There were no hunting club signs, either.

Puzzled, but undeterred, we continued our journey and found, in a thicket of cedar trees, the first house place. Little was there in the way of antique bottles, except a broken aqua Dr. Caldwell's Syrup of Pepsin and a common, but unembossed, turpentine bottle. Disgusted by our bad luck, I walked right past a 1940s era whiskey still. Cousin Billy called my attention to it and we checked it out, admiring the many slashes cleaved through the thin metal sides by an ax-wielding revenue man.

We continued our search and continued to see many more deer stands spaced evenly apart in the tree line. Forty minutes later, I spotted a tall chimney, signifying another house place. A canopy of huge, weather-worn oaks shaded the site. Ancient, hand-wrought iron hinges and other bits of metal forged many years before by a blacksmith dotted the site as did many pieces of utilitarian stoneware, but nothing whole was found. Not even the fragment of an antique bottle was seen.

Exhausted by our futile but interesting search, Cousin Billy and I quenched our thirst at one of the numerous springs en route to what we hoped would be a much more lucrative bottle site. We continued our walk and continued to marvel about the number of deer stands,

A grove of yellow-leafed maple trees beckoned from one corner of the valley where on a small rise in the ground we found our third house site. Cousin Billy and I sat down upon a thick, leafy carpet to rest and as our eyes took in the beautiful view, we could not but be awed by God's

handiwork. A stone wall at the rear of the yard matched a pair of chimneys and we found numerous pieces of antique bottles in addition to shards of stoneware and rusty iron implements. Most of the bottles appeared to be from the 1880s to the 1920s and many had been broken when tossed against the wall.

We spent the better part of three hours scouring the area for antique bottles, but all that we found were damaged, or shattered into small pieces. Among the "fatalities" were a straight-sided amber Chattanooga Coca-Cola, an aqua Perry Davis Painkiller, a Ponds Extract, a clear Carter's cone ink, an amber E.R. Betterton whiskey flask from Chattanooga and a Dr. Kilmer's Cough Cure. Near the end of my dig near the base of the stone wall, I found the day's only keeper – a small-sized, cobalt poison bottle in the shape of a skull. It had a three-quarter-inch-long crack and a lip chip, but was otherwise intact.

Noting the lateness of the day, Cousin Billy and I decided to head back to my truck, since it would take us a couple of hours to reach it. We decided to take a shortcut across the valley since the crops had already been harvested.

So with my treasured poison bottle tucked safely into the upper pocket of my Liberty overalls, we started across the valley floor, our eyes downward in hopes of finding an Indian arrowhead in the stubble.

Three-quarters of the way across, Cousin Billy suddenly took an interest in farming and asked what did I think the

year's crop had been. The stubble turned out to be thick stalks, cut to within an inch or two of the ground by a machete or other tool, then gathered by hand. Maybe they were sugar cane, I surmised, although that was an unusual crop for this part of the state.

Fifty yards from the edge of the mountain and very close to our original starting point, Billy and I suddenly found ourselves in the midst of an unharvested crop of marijuana! As I stood there, shell-shocked, eyes wide and mouth agape, Cousin Billy pretended to swoon and declared he had finally found Paradise, sniffing at the plants' hairy buds.

I started pointing out several facts to Cousin Billy that he apparently failed to see in the midst of his delirium: (1) we were literally sitting ducks should someone choose at that moment to draw a bead on us from one of the numerous "deer stands" surrounding the valley (the mystery of their function was finally solved!). (2) If we were lucky enough to get away with a part of the illicit crop, what would our explanation be to a deputy sheriff who might corral us on a routine traffic stop, and (3) if we did make it home, what was he planning to do with it?

I also pointed out that my truck had been parked along that road for nine hours and, in all likelihood, had drawn the attention of the valley's property owner, overseer or "pot" planter himself.

To avoid being used as catfish bait or

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A definitely elaborate Victorian young lady in her exquisite dress and hat. This Cabinet Card has the beveled gold edge which dates it to the late 1880s. Many of the ladies of this period would not breast feed because it was beneath their dignity. Just a fad, I suppose.



A commercial studio portrait showing a cute little girl with her nipples medicine bottle along with her favorite doll.



The "real photo" post card is really a unique form of its own. Often the photographer traveled from house to house plying his trade like the old tin tinker. This young child is using a medicine bottle, capped with a very large nipple. I personally love this type of photo because it shows how much of America really lived.

References:

Collector's Guide to Early Photographs, by O. Henry Mace © 1990.

Catalogue of Civil War Photographers, compiled by George F. Witham © 1988.

Exposing America, by David Horn © 2006.

Introduction to Civil War Photography, by Ross J. Kelbaugh © 1991.

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sinkhole fillers, I told Cousin Billy that we needed to forget about the pot and think about our hides and get the heck out of there. Ever optimistic Cousin Billy retorted that nobody would ever know we had been in the valley, much less catch us red-handed gathering some of the crop.

It was then I remembered the crack in the poison bottle's "head" and responded: "We may not get caught in here, but if we are and *by the right one*, it's going to be PURE POISON for us!"

A gunshot at the head of the valley accomplished what my admonishments could not – get Cousin Billy moving toward the truck. We reached home without encountering anyone and reminisced about our day's adventures.

I placed the poison bottle on my night stand where it would be among the first things I saw the next morning, serving as a constant reminder for me to try to make it through the days ahead without getting a matching crack in the skull!

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is a true story and one very few people have heard until now. Although Cousin Billy and I wanted to revisit the valley, we never had an opportunity to do so. It is anyone's guess as to how long the valley was used to grow marijuana prior to our visit, or how long the operation continued. However, two years ago, I noticed a photo on the front page of my hometown newspaper that a major crop of pot had been confiscated and hauled away by the Jackson County, Alabama Sheriff's Department. While I am not certain, there is a possibility that this pot came from the same field Cousin Billy and I had stumbled onto in November 2001.

