

Alvah I. “Al” Dorsey (1893-1982)

By: Jim Casada

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Growing up in Bryson City it was my privilege to know a number of interesting and unusual characters. Al Dorsey had to be the strangest of them all. His offbeat personality and bizarre lifestyle held great allure for boys. Frequent admonitions from my parents to the effect “you don’t need to be hanging around that dirty old man,” together with their refusal to explain why they felt that way, merely added to his mystique. An old river rat, to them he was a local incarnation of some of the stranger or more unsavory of Mark Twain’s Mississippi River characters, although at the time none of the bevy of youngsters who spent appreciable time with him fishing in the badly polluted Tuckaseegee River realized just how sordid a background he had or how checkered his life had been.



Al Dorsey (photo courtesy of John Quinett)

I knew him mostly through fishing. Every year when summer rolls around and when a string of miserably hot, humid days leave even the high country sweltering in midday misery, my thoughts wander back to yester-youth and the simple joys of catfishing with old Al. I had a whole bunch of

“holes” in the Tuckasegee where I matched wits with Mr. Whiskers, although none of them were more than a mile upstream or down from the Everett Street Bridge. On the north side of the river, where Sim DeHart’s dry goods store abutted the bridge on one side of the street and the local pool hall on the other, there was another appealing part of the overall catfish equation. That was where the Al Dorsey kept his home-made, flat-bottomed boat chained to a tree. He maneuvered the boat with a long pole rather than a paddle, and his stretch of river was a relatively short one circumscribed by rapids at either end of a stretch of flat water less than a mile in length.

As I write these words I am looking at the front page of the *Bryson City Times* for November 6, 1925. The lead news for that week focused on Dorsey, revealing an aspect of his life unknown to me until long after I reached adulthood. The headline reads: “Al Dorsey, Slayer of Muse, Gets Sentence of Ten Years. Was Tried for Second Degree Murder.” The subhead, in an interesting bit of editorializing mixed in with news, states “Sentence Regarded as Extremely Light.” When I first read this account, realization finally dawned why my parents frequently suggested it would be best to avoid Al’s company, never mind that Dad did acknowledge Dorsey was masterful when it came to catching catfish.

My thinking, throughout boyhood and well beyond, had been that they discouraged any connection with old Al simply because he always looked unkempt; drank more than a bit; wore a visible layer of grime on his ankles and lower legs instead of socks; and dressed in a somewhat unusual fashion for hot weather with overalls, long johns, a long-sleeved shirt, and brogans. The clodhoppers were worn on feet which, like the rest of his body, were strangers to soap and warm water. When one was downwind of Al the air tended to be pungent indeed. Yet I found him, as did other boys who spent appreciable time along the river bank, endlessly fascinating. He was kind to apprentice river rats, kept a watchful eye on our youthful shenanigans, and readily shared his considerable knowledge of the fine art of catching catfish.

Interestingly, the newspaper account makes no mention whatsoever of the circumstances behind the affray although it goes into lurid detail about the actual event. However, oral history, conversations over the years with multiple contemporaries of Dorsey, and the official transcript of the trial fill in the blanks. Dorsey discovered a railroad engineer who worked for the southern Railway and boarded in Bryson City, Troy Muse, was having an affair with his fetching red-headed wife, nee Minnie Watkins. He reportedly said: “If I’d been able to lay my hands on a gun when I caught them, I’d have shot the son of a bitch right then, and I’ll do it yet. You wait and see.” When weeks passed and nothing happened, most folks aware of the situation believed things had calmed down.

That was the situation on September 21, 1925, when hundreds of local residents were celebrating an evening topping off a lovely Indian Summer day by attending a Mutt and Jeff show being held under a tent just up Main Street from the town square. It was at that point, according to multiple witnesses, that Dorsey approached Muse, stuck out his hand, and made comments to the effect that they should shake and forget their differences. As they shook hands Dorsey then produced a revolver and shot Muse in the abdomen at point-blank range. They then struggled, with Dorsey emptying his pistol and hitting Muse a second time in the knee. It was only at this point that Muse pulled his handgun and fired at a fleeing Dorsey. My father, a teenager at the time, was attending the nearby show and was

among the first to arrive at the scene. He said Muse left the scene without saying a word, while Dorsey, who was slightly wounded in the shoulder, moaned “Oh Lordy, he’s killed me. I’m kilt. I’m kilt.”

Local physician Dr. A. M. Bennett initially attended Muse, who had made his way to his lodgings at the Cooper House, where Horace Kephart spent so many years. Realizing he needed specialized treatment, Bennett recommended getting Muse to Asheville’s Mission Hospital as quickly as possible. A special Southern Railways train conveyed him there but he died within hours.

In a marked departure from today’s judicial proceedings, the trial occurred only six weeks later. Local emotions ran high; so much so that the impaneled jurors came from neighboring Macon County rather than being selected from Swain County residents. Most people felt that Dorsey should be tried for first degree murder, and when the solicitor “positively refused,” notwithstanding the grand jury having returned a true bill, those in attendance, as well as many in the legal community, were outraged. Dorsey was found guilty of second degree murder and sentenced to “not over ten nor under eight years at hard labor in the state penitentiary.” Apparently his time of actual imprisonment was even shorter, because the 1930 census shows him living in Bryson City.

My acquaintance with Al came long afterwards. He had been born about as close to having a silver spoon in his mouth as turn of the century Swain County could offer. His parents, John H. and Laura L. Gunter.Dorsey, whose graves lie alongside that of their son, were affluent pillars of the community with the father being a respected local merchant. Their home on Everett Street catty-cornered across from the Presbyterian Church was one of the most sumptuous residences in all of Swain County. That was where, upon release from prison, Al returned to live with his parents in what had, at one time, been a residential showplace. But by the time I knew Dorsey his parents were long deceased and their place of grandeur, with all its cupolas, intricate woodwork, and sweeping porches, had reached a state of decrepitude. Since it lay not more than a couple of hundred yards from my parents’ Black Hill home, I walked by it every time I went to town or school and even as a youngster sometimes wondered about the circumstances behind its faded glory.

As a boy though, all I knew, from the time I was 10 or 11 on into my mid-teens, was that being around old Al was pure pleasure. Throughout the summer he fished, day and night, in the waters of the Tuckaseegee. During the day he ran trot lines and throw lines, did a lot of pole watching on the bank, and also made his way up and down the river in his john boat. At night he fished from the bridge.



The Bryson City Bridge in 1942 (TVA photograph collection, National Archives, Morrow, GA)

To a starry-eyed boy enchanted by anything connected with hunting or fishing, his knowledge of the river had a mysterious, magical quality about it. Disreputable though his past may have been, to his considerable credit he kept an eye on a number of boys who, like me, spent a lot of time fishing and piddling around at the river. Similarly, he willingly, even eagerly shared his knowledge of how to catch catfish, something at which he was a true master.

Everyone in town knew him, and at some point during my close acquaintance with Al he accomplished something which was the talk of local barber shops and the gang at Loafer's Glory for weeks. One night while fishing off the Everett Street Bridge he hooked a mighty catfish on the only decent rig he owned, a steel rod-and-reel outfit equipped with nylon line. An epic battle ensued, with scores of people lining the sidewalk on the bridge as it unfolded. After the better part of a half hour Al managed to ease the fish close towards shore adjacent to Conley's Drug Store (the area where today's town office is located) and then, carefully working the rod around a series of street lights which set atop the bridge railing, he made his way down the bank at the south end of the bridge. As the catfish wallowed in the shallows he waded into the river, ran his arm through its mouth, and wrestled it out onto the bank. It weighed upwards of 50 pounds, a veritable giant for a mountain stream.

At some point, long after my halcyon days of innocent youth spent in his company, the decaying mansion in which he lived reached a point of no return. A local physician, Dr. William Mitchell, bought the property, razed the building, and erected an office. Dorsey moved to a nearby slab shack and

somehow eked out a living. Then, in the final decade or so of his life, a simple act of charity wrought a glorious change in old Al.

The recently widowed wife of a local taxi driver gave him her deceased husband's clothes. Somehow this small token of caring and concern awakened long dormant pride in Al. According to the lady, "from then on he started dressing up even though until that point I never knew him to wear a pair of shoes in the summer." It was also during this time, late in Dorsey's life, that he began attending First Baptist Church and was converted. The photograph of Al taken during this period (page 1) shows a man whose appearance is at stark contrast with the one I knew. While he is sporting a few days' worth of whiskers, otherwise he is neat, with his hair well combed and dressed in a nifty shirt and a sport jacket. According to the late Kay Wright Killibrew, he was readily accepted by church members and became a staunch, respected part of the congregation.

Old Al was one of those delightful characters, and today they seem to be in increasingly short supply, who made the Smokies of my boyhood such a wonderful place to come of age. This troubled, tattered soul may not have been the finest of role models, but he was a first-rate mentor when it came to one particular type of fishing. The man lent a degree of color to my youth which has only become more striking with the passage of time and the acquisition of additional knowledge about him. Whatever may have been his shortcomings and sins, my memories of him are filled with nothing but fondness

His gravesite, unmarked for decades following his death in 1982, recently received a marker thanks to contributions from an anonymous donor and some deacons from First Baptist Church. Though simple and lacking either the size or ornateness of many tombstones in Bryson City Cemetery, the engraving of a catfish on the stone bears mute but meaningful testament to the man for whom catfishing became a metaphor for life after his release from prison. Just as he had once "cleaned up" catfish he caught in the badly polluted Tuckasegee by keeping them in a cage-like device in Toot Hollow Branch, which flowed alongside his home, he had turned around and cleaned up his life. . I will never hear Alison Krauss sing the grand bluegrass classic, "Catfish John," without thinking of "Catfish Al" and being stirred by the lyrics, "I was proud to be his friend." Similarly, it uplifts my spirits and makes my soul soar a bit to realize that my friend was a changed man in his final years.



Grave marker of Al Dorsey, who rests alongside his parents in Section VI of the cemetery.

SOURCES

Personal knowledge; information from my father, Commodore A. Casada, who as a teenage boy was one of the first on the scene of the shooting; U. S. Census records; court transcript of Dorsey's initial hearing, *Bryson City Times*, Nov. 6, 1925; and columns by this author in the *Smoky Mountain Times*. These include pieces that appeared in for May 24, 2007, Aug. 9, 2007 and Feb. 12 and Feb. 19, 2009; June 23, 2011; Apr. 12, 2012; and July 7, 2013 issues. I also wrote a piece on him for the *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, Sept. 19, 2009 and an article, "Of Catfish and a Smelly Old Codger," appeared in *North Carolina Outdoorsman*, Sept., 1988, pages 12-13.

Editor's Note

Dr. A.M. Bennett was called, by telephone, to attend to the wounds of Muse in town after he was shot; he later testified in the court proceedings that he advised that Muse be taken to Asheville by special train "as we had no lights of anything to work with here." Dr. B.C. Thomasson accompanied Muse to the Asheville hospital, and was there when he died the following day.

Three local attorneys were involved in the trial – McKinley Edwards for the prosecution; Stanley Black and Thurman Leatherwood for the defense. The preliminary hearing was conducted before W.M. Taylor, Justice of the Peace.

Sheriff Gola P Ferguson testified at the trial that after taking the pistol from Dorsey, he handed it to Mark Cathey to "break down."

Thomasson, Bennett, Edwards, Leatherwood, Black, Taylor, Ferguson, Cathey, as well as Troy Muse, his wife, and two of their infant children all take their rest, along with Al Dorsey and his parents, on Hallowed Hill.