

TAHLEQUAH

Grapewine

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Three respected Tahlequah brothers made their own way, but they give the credit to their parents

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Cover: From left: Tim and Diana Baker, Bill John and Sherry Baker

TAHLEQUAH
Grapevine

The summer edition marks the sixth installment of the reimagined Tahlequah Grapevine. For a while there, we were afraid we wouldn't get it done.

In days of old, April was the busiest month for our staff. January and February were hectic as well. This meant I considered the year's first four-month period the worst period. Not anymore. Now that June is cram-packed full of products, the second four months are a bigger source of consternation.

For readers, though, it's a great time to be a subscriber.

This particular Grapevine was especially stressful for me, because I wrote one of the stories. It was more challenging than the one I did for the inaugural magazine in January 2023. That's because it involved interviewing members of one of Cherokee County's leading families. I didn't want to botch it, so it took hours of my time – far more than it usually takes to whip out a feature or editorial.

But Tim and Bill John Baker deserved as much time as I could spare them. Same for their late mother, Isabel, whom everyone adored. I interviewed the brothers for over two hours, and I typed almost everything they said. Because of my arthritis, I can't grasp a pen for long. But imagine sifting through two hours' worth of incessant keyboarding! I had reams of material, all of it good, and it was almost impossible to weed anything out. To me, it's remarkable that people of their status – who have rubbed elbows with some of the most important people in the world – will sit down with the lowly editor of their little hometown paper. But they think nothing of it.

There's more. Jake Sermersheim wrote a sidebar on track star Trae Baker, who has written another chapter in his family's history of excellence. Nancy Garber talked to Robbie Frank about his incarnation of the Squeeze Inn. Greg Combs wrote about power walker Nannette Jones. Layce Gardner tackled obscure communities with colorful names. Rob Anderson did a feature on camping. And Dan Strayer explains his experience with health care in the UK. All of these folks have worked for TDP at one time or another.

So grab yourself a glass of sweet tea or a beer, find a comfy chair, and start reading. You'll like what you see.

- Kim Poindexter, Executive Editor



Meet the Editor

Kim Poindexter has been a member of the TDP news team since 1985 and the top editor since 1987. She is in the Oklahoma Journalism Hall of Fame and was the 2022 Oklahoma Press Association Beachy Musselman Award winner. She has won more than 200 journalism awards during her career, both individually and as part of the TDP team, which has been named Best Newspaper of the Year the past five years by CNHI, and won the Sequoyah Award at this year's OPA convention. She and her husband, Chris, have an adult son, Cole, and a daughter-in-law, Dani.

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The Fabulous Bakers

Three respected Tahlequah brothers made their own way, but they give the credit to their parents

By Kim Poindexter

With the Baker clan, countless narratives meld into enduring history. But for most long-time Cherokee County residents, the never-ending story starts with Isabel.

"Izzy," as everyone called her, was a formidable woman who followed her own heart and razor-sharp instincts. She was full of sage advice for anyone who asked for it. And over the years, she's had enough ink from the Tahlequah Daily Press to fill several private barrels.

Tim Jr., the eldest of Isabel's three sons, is dignified and shrewd, and he says his mother always warned her boys never to get into a scrap with someone who buys ink by the barrel. He may like the quip, but he's never been intimidated. I should know. He and I got into arguments several times when he was on the Tahlequah school board. Once he said to me, irritably, "You always think you have to have the last word!" I asked, "What do you mean?" He shot back, "See there?"

The middle son, Donn - a high-profile lawyer like his brother - instilled fear in the hearts of prosecutors everywhere. He could keep media hounds at bay, though his legendary reputation as a flamboyant defense attorney drew in more than one quote-hungry reporter to a fate of subtle humiliation. And like Tim, he was always in the news, and not always in a positive way.

Isabel was nonchalant about that. One day, I was talking to her on the phone, and I told her I thought Tim and Donn might be annoyed with the newspaper. She said, "They're big boys; they can handle it. Now, if you were to get onto my baby, I might have something to say about that."



This photo was taken when the three "Baker boys" were in their youth. Isabel is in front. From left, standing: Tim Sr., Donn, Tim Jr., and Bill John.

The "baby" is Bill John - an eclectic blend of tender-hearted pragmatism - who was as protective of Isabel as she was of him. Several years ago,

when I needed quotes for a story and couldn't track him down, I called Isabel. She said, "Give me a few," and rang off. I thought she meant a few days. But

within five minutes, Bill John called. He said, "What's up?" and mentioned he was on the East Coast at a Sequoyah Indians tournament of some sort. I said, "I didn't expect you to call me right now - it could've waited!" He said, "Kim, when Mama says it's important, it's important."

As it turned out, Bill John became more important than he himself could ever have expected, though Isabel had no doubt. Eventually, her baby would become principal chief of the largest Native tribe in the country.

For folks so well-known and honored in Northeastern Oklahoma, the Bakers are remarkably down to earth. Isabel and the patriarch, Tim Sr., are gone, but they left a legacy - one imbued with a commitment to education, culture, women's rights, health care, and most of all, family.

A few weeks ago, I stopped by Bill John's home on College. Next to it is what he calls a "she-shed," but it looks more like a lodge, with beautiful wood panels on the walls, a graceful staircase, and memorabilia, family photos and awards from every era on display. On this occasion, he was joined by his wife, Sherry, as well as Tim and wife Diana. Tim dismissed comments from the visitors about the posh surroundings with a wave of his hand, and then said he and Bill John were nothing special - and then, he said with a chuckle, "But our beautiful wives make us special."

Sherry met Bill John when her father, Bob Robertson, was Tahlequah mayor. She remembers card nights at the Baker home, and how for Tim and Bill John, a card game was a life-or-death situation. It might be intimidating for someone who hadn't grown up with a houseful of brothers, like Sherry did. But when she was asked why she made such a "stupid mistake" during one tense game, she took it in stride. She felt she belonged, almost from the beginning.

"It was always an adventure," Sherry said. "And I had a mother-in-law who didn't hide her feelings. I lost my mother early and never thought I'd have someone step up and be a mom to me. A day doesn't go by that Isabel is not missed."

While Sherry's a local, Diana is from



Lloyd Wesley Baker, the paternal grandfather of Tim, Donn and Bill John, was one of 12 children. He was a barber for 50 years, across from what now is the Cherokee museum. Starting at about age 11, Tim would shine shoes in the barbershop and sweep up the hair. Lloyd's wife, Audie, taught in rural schools for 40 years in Cherokee County. She was half Cherokee and half French.

Paris, Texas. But she got used to the close-knit Bakers and feels blessed to be part of the family. Everyone knows how Isabel doted on their two young daughters, Bailee and Blake, whom she took everywhere.

Tim and Bill John like to talk about their kids and grandkids. These days, Tim is especially proud of grandson Trae, who recently broke several records in high school track. And the brothers will talk about their parents. But they only talk about themselves when pressed, although their resumes could fill volumes as extensive as the law books in Tim's library. Both agree how they got to where they are today is more important than where they actually are.

The "how" always involves Isabel, and "Bake," too; that was Izzy's affectionate nickname for her husband.

Isabel was immersed in Democratic politics, and many remember when the Cherokee County Democratic Women's Club was the largest of its kind not just in the state, but in the country. When I first started working at the Press in 1985, there were about 200 active members. Isabel and Pat Frank were key figures, well-respected on the national scene. Years ago, former Oklahoma Gov. David Walters introduced Isabel at the state Democrat Conven-

tion, and as she was honored with the Carl Albert Award, Walters referred to her as "the matriarch of the Oklahoma Democratic Party." But she always said it wasn't about politics; it was about community, and she was convinced the Democrats hewed to that philosophy.

"[Former governors David] Walters, [David] Boren, [George] Nigh - anyone in state office knew they had to come here to Cherokee County to get the blessing of these women," Tim said.

Tim Sr. was an educator, and so was Isabel, but they started their careers in an era when women were granted only marginal respect.

"Mom was resentful of rules that did not give women equal rights," Tim said. "When she was doing her intern teaching, she was pregnant with me, and had to hide it. Had the administration discovered she was pregnant, they would have taken her out of her teaching internship."

Isabel didn't care for the way women were paid, either.

"They gave raises to heads of household. Dad would get a raise, and Mom wouldn't. It made no sense to her that if you were man, you'd get a raise," Tim said. "She was astute to look at things like that and to show how unreasonable they were. Many changes have

occurred since. When I was in law school, and I graduated in 1973, there were 100 students – one Black man and one woman. When Blake graduated, it was 50-50. But back in Mom’s day, all the doctors, judges and lawyers were men. Mom looked at that closely for a long time. She said, ‘Anyone who has any sense realizes women are just as intelligent as men.’”

The discrimination was even more overt when Isabel was a child. Tim’s Grandmother Keith had a darker complexion, and landlords wouldn’t rent to the family because they looked “too Native.” One property where they were refused accommodation is part of where Bill John lives now, and he built the “shed” partly in her honor.

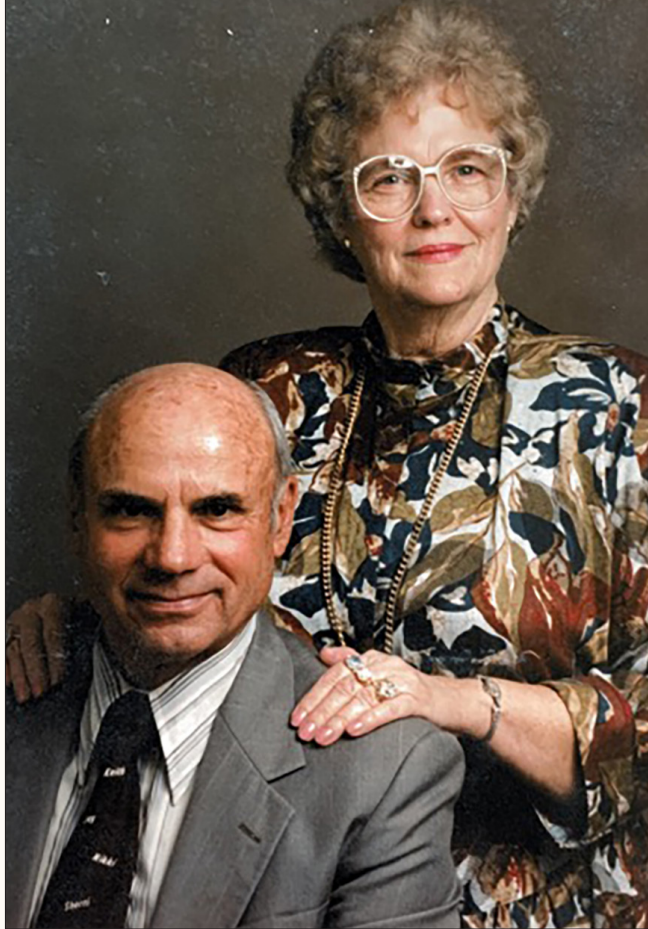
“She remembered being turned back as a child, in that house next door,” Bill John said, gesturing. “She swore she’d live there some day.”

That memory might explain Isabel’s drive to succeed.

She graduated from high school at age 16, obtained a master’s degree in elementary education from Oklahoma State University (then Oklahoma A&M) and a doctorate in curriculum and instruction, then taught in public schools nearly 20 years. She also did stints at Morehead State University, OSU and Northeastern State University. She served on the OSU/A&M College of Regents, and was vice chair of the Tahlequah Hospital Foundation and president of Phi Delta Kappa. Her honors are too extensive to list, but they included Oklahoma Women’s Hall of Fame, Oklahoma Mother of the Year, OSU’s College of Education Hall of Fame, NSU’s President’s Award for Community Service, and NSU Centurion.

“She got one honor after another, and she said, ‘When you get old enough, you get them all,’” Bill John said.

As she got older, she expected women to begin blazing new trails at any moment.



A portrait of Isabel and Tim Baker Sr., whom Izzy affectionately called “Bake.”

“Mother went to like eight or nine Democrat National Conventions as delegate, and she really believed Hillary Clinton would be first woman president. Sherry and I went to one. She introduced Oklahoma’s delegation on national TV, and introduced Hillary as the next president of the United States,” Bill John said.

Tim recalled when Walters appointed Isabel to the OSU Board of Regents.

“One of the things Mom did – and I’m proud she could do it – was after she got to looking at the budget and the appropriations for salaries, she noticed a disparity between what the lady professors and the men were making,” he said. “Every other regent was male, and she said, ‘Gentlemen, I need you to answer a question. I don’t understand why we are paying a substantially different [amount] for men and women with the same education, teaching the same hours. Can any of you explain that?’ They said, ‘Isabel, I don’t think we have an explanation.’ And they brought the women up to the same level of pay.”

Isabel was an early feminist, though she might not have referred to herself

that way. Then again, so was Bake, in a manner of speaking.

“Dad taught me one of the best lessons: being respectful to your spouse, and to women in general,” Tim said.

Bake was more than just a teacher; he received his doctorate and was also a lay Methodist preacher and a coach.

“We had it great because Dad was good in science and math, Mom in speech and English, so we always had someone we could go to for help in school,” Tim said. “But we grew up as teachers’ kids, and teachers didn’t make that much money, so Dad had to find other incomes. He’d build houses, and he’d come home at lunch and eat with us. His overalls were white from sweat, and he did all the work. He would build the house, then sell it, and that meant additional money for our schooling. He said, ‘If you’re gonna do anything, do it right.’”

Bill John added that Bake would do everything associated with building – shingles, wiring, plumbing and framing – except he wouldn’t finish the sheetrock, and he’d hire someone else to lay the bricks. Many of his houses still stand. Later, Bill John also got involved in construction, but he admitted with a chuckle, “I had subs.”

The three Baker boys were supported and encouraged by Izzy and Bake in all their endeavors, and they credit that deep involvement with ensuring their success as adults.

“We drew the long straws when we got our folks,” Tim said.

But Isabel had a rule: Her boys were going to college, and if nothing else, they could get a teaching degree, because they could always “fall back” on it.

“There had to be an A plan and B plan. Mom said B plan can be teaching, and if you want to be lawyer, that’s plan A,” Tim said. “Mom would give you advice, but explain it to you in a way that made more sense.”

Tim was in his second year of law school when John Pearce, who was

then superintendent of Tahlequah Public Schools, called him about a coaching job.

"I said, 'Mom, I love coaching. What do you think about my quitting law school and coming back to Tahlequah?' She hesitated and said, 'Well, son, don't they have little league stuff you could do? Couldn't you get that gratification from coaching your kids and others, and take better care of your family if you got a law degree?' So I called Pearce and told him I was staying in law school. It was the best decision I've ever made," Tim said.

Bill John took a different path, but arrived at the same destination.

"When I graduated from high school, I figured I'd join the Army. Vietnam was going pretty strong; Dad had served, everybody had served. Mom said, 'You know they need officers, too, but they have to have a degree.' I agreed with that train of thought. By the time I got my degree, I was married and had kids, and my lottery number was 340, so I would never go."

Tim did wind up teaching general law classes at Northeastern, and while in law school, he taught junior high in the Oklahoma City metro area. If fate had taken another turn, he might have been an FBI agent.

"I got through the clearances for special agent training; I had a minor in chemistry, so they were looking at me for a forensic agent," he said.

He moved to the Washington, D.C., area and worked in the fingerprint division for sixth months, and then went to Quantico.

"The first week of special agent training, [President] Nixon came down [and decreed there would be] no occupational deferments. The FBI didn't want to spend money training some guy and then maybe he'd get killed in 'Nam, so me and three other guys were out," Tim said.

His teaching degree took him to the Midwest/Del City public school system. As it happened, one person dropped out of the law class of 100, and although he would start his night classes two weeks late, he got in, and after graduation, moved back to Tahlequah to practice law.

For Donn, a combination of factors

made him one of the most revered defense attorneys in the state. One was his personality. Bake called him "Whistleblitches," because he had a way of embellishing almost anything. That trait would eventually serve him well in the courtroom. But Donn, too, started on the teaching route.

"Donnie was coaching in Hulbert, and people loved him. He was recently inducted into the Hall of Fame of Hulbert, where he taught school and coached," Tim said. "But then mom and I talked him into going to law school. He was a very good criminal lawyer; he had a way of relating to jurors, telling stories about his clients."

Long-time Cherokee County residents tell tales about Donn's tactics in the courtroom, and over the years, they've been exaggerated. When new folks move to town, they may hear tongue-in-cheek rumors that everyone here gets "one free killin," and that's a Donnie Baker maneuver. Another is the notorious defense in murder cases wherein the victim "needed killin."

In fact, Tim was the impetus for the latter.

"This family had a fight, and they were breaking jaws, doing all kinds of damage. I asked the jury, 'Have you ever known anyone who needed their ass whipped? Well, I have - and that's what this case will be about.' Donn just took it from there," Tim said, and added, "By the way, the jury let that guy off; [the victim] had it coming."

Bill John laughed and threw in, "Remember that guy who died after he kept backing into his knife?"

Donn became so celebrated for his dramatics, Tim said, that bailiffs would flip coins to see who got to sit in the courtroom and watch him perform. College students also lined up to take in the show.

"Donn taught at NSU, and everyone loved his class," Tim said. "One of the deans came to him and said, 'Mr. Baker, you have all these A's and B's and no one is flunking out. Mr. So-and-So has more of a bell curve.' Donn told him, 'I'm just a better teacher. Are you gonna get onto me for being a better teacher?'"



These days, Tim Baker is especially proud of grandson Trae, who has broken several high school track records. From left are: Tim's son Jay, Tim, Trae and his girlfriend, Brooklyn Tiblow.

He made everything interesting. He always had a story, and people relate to that.”

Bill John’s forte was business. Adhering to Isabel’s rule, he got the expected degree, in history and political science. Then he began renting out mobile homes, but Isabel nudged him in another direction.

“Mother came in one day and said, ‘Go to Crane Furniture’ - that was where Ned’s is now. I was doing well with the trailer park, and making good money, but I was lonely. It wasn’t busy there, and I was more social than that. So I ended up buying the store.”

In 1978, he moved to the current location of Baker’s Furniture. He still dabbled, raising cattle and selling insurance. He built Tahlequah Motor Lodge and some condominiums, and has now been a landlord for 50 years. And he ran for office a few times - for state representative and mayor. He didn’t win, but he laughs about it now, because he ultimately landed one of the most important offices in the entire country.

“I really believe everything I did was just training to become chief,” Bill John said.

Before that, though, he captured the District 1 Cherokee Nation Tribal Council seat.

“Back when Wilma [Mankiller] first became chief, [the tribe] didn’t have a pot to pee in,” he said. “I remember fussing for two or three weeks over \$1 million that wasn’t earmarked for salaries or programs. I was the only councilor who went to Oklahoma City with five chiefs to work on a motor fuels compact, which brought in millions in unencumbered money. Some went for scholarships, and there were other things we could do for roads and bridges, and we started an education trust fund. I’ll never forget; next year, we had a little money built up that wasn’t in a lockbox.”

Cherokee Nation then got looped into a federal program to test every woman who came into Hastings Hospital for

breast cancer.

“We found six women who had it, only to learn we didn’t have a dime to help them,” he said.

These types of discussions always reveal Bill John’s emotional side. He’s a man who isn’t ashamed to shed a few tears in public.

“We told them they had it, but we couldn’t do damn thing about it. But then we were able to dedicate \$1 million for breast cancer treatment,” he said.

Bill John’s business and financial acumen served the tribe well when he became chief.

“We had about a \$12 million draw on our gaming revenues; we were losing that on our businesses outside of gaming,” he said. “But three years ago, we made more outside of gaming than in it. That’s been a major switch in where our money comes from. We’re now talking about contracts in the billions.”

A major point of pride is the Oklahoma State University College of Osteopathic Medicine at Cherokee Nation. Since Bill John focused from the earli-

est days of his administration on health care for tribal members, and Isabel had intricate connections with OSU, it was perhaps preordained.

Several years earlier, Bill John said, Isabel had pointed out over 50 percent of medical students at OSU were women, yet there were no women administrators or faculty.

“Kayse Shrum was the first ‘token’ woman at the med school, then she was president of it, and now she’s OSU president. She broke all the ceilings there,” Bill John said. “One day, Mother called and said, ‘Kayse wants to visit with you.’ I said, ‘What does she want?’ Mom said, ‘Money; what do you think she wants?’”

What she really wanted to talk about was the need for doctors - specifically, Cherokee doctors. As Bill John describes it, Cherokee Nation and OSU COM was a “marriage made in heaven.”

A skill for which Bill John has long been known is his ability to rattle off accurate figures, minute details and history, tribal or otherwise. That helped him in college: “I could remember everything if a professor told me it would be on a test.”

These figures are impressive, almost unprecedented.

“We’ve doubled the number of doctors, and half are here in Oklahoma; 25 are Native. Nationwide, .02 percent are Native. It’s been a great partnership and investment,” he said, referring to OSU COM at Cherokee Nation.

Since he termed out as chief, Bill John has served as chairman of the executive leadership team for Cherokee Nation Businesses. That’s kept him in the thick of tribal action, and he has watched the medical school expand under now-Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr., whom he has known since high school.

“That 469,000-square-foot clinic at the Hastings complex was built and finished in time for COVID, so we had the room to social distance, and were able to have walk-thru inocula-



Bill John Baker poses with “Legend of the Eclipse.” It was a gift to Baker from the artist, Donald Vann.

tions," he said. "We don't have enough doctors and nurses to fill [the facility] yet, but we still get \$105 million a year to operate, and send patients to specialists in Tulsa until we get enough doctors. That's more than Wilma [Mankiller] even had in a budget."

Bill John gets on a roll when talking about tribal health care: "That medical school will pay dividends for the next seven generations. Think about the lives of students who become doctors, the patients who get to see those doctors."

Bill John can always talk politics, but Tim made his own foray into politics, serving as president of the Tahlequah Board of Education for five years. He was also Quarterback Club president for both Tahlequah and NSU, and he coached little league baseball for over 25 years. He was involved with little league football from its inception, plus baseball, football, wrestling. During his board tenure, Heritage Elementary and a new gymnasium were built, thanks to passage of a bond issue. Heritage was big news at the time; many people suspected the area was in a flood zone. But Tim, ever the legal sharpie, proved otherwise.

The lives of generations is a key element for the Bakers. Both Tim and Bill John have large families. Several of their adult children work for the tribe, and now, so does Tim, as general counsel for CNB. (Sadly, for those of us who might avail ourselves of his legal services, his contract precludes private work.)

Tim and Diana, who married in 1991, have Keith and Jay Baker, Nikki Limore, Bailee Rowlett, and Blake Toellner. A number of grandkids are in the lineup, and Tim can quickly cite their names: Macy, twins Grace and Trae, Libby, Lake, Dex, Luke, Jed, Alixa, Teighan, Isabel, Birdie and Bolden Belle.

"I've had 50 years of practicing law, and I have five successful kids whom I love, and they love me," Tim said. "The family we have is what I'm most proud of. In my law practice, I always try my very best to be so prepared. A lot of times, you might not be the smartest, but if you're willing to outwork the 'other side,' you'll come out ahead. I always made sure with my clients that I took their cases to heart; I gave them the same treatment



Cherokee Nation Supreme Court Justice G. Wilcoxon administered the oath of office in October 2011 for Principal Chief Bill John Baker, with wife Sherry at his side.

I'd want my family to get."

Bill John and Sherry, who wed in 1995, have Brooke, Angie, Lacey, B.J., J.R. and Bryan. Grandkids are Chase, Carlye, Isaac, Jake, Ryleigh, Jencee, Jill, Avery, Able, Gideon, Miriam, Trinity, Trista, and Trylian.

"I've done a lot of good things, especially [pushing] health care, and Mother was elated with all of them," he said.

The community was shocked by Donn's sudden passing November 2020, during the COVID pandemic. Surviving him are his wife, Sharon; children Jeffrey Donn Baker and Sherri Cometti and their spouses. He also has grandkids: Jake, Jacie, Justi and Hannah Baker, and Cade Cometti. He leaves behind a number of great-grands, admirers, grateful clients, and tales - some of them tall.

Tim remembers Donn campaigning in Hulbert for Bill John when he was running for chief.

"He ran across some people I had sued. The bad thing about a small community is that everyone knows everyone, and those folks were still mad at me," Tim said. "Donn was having trouble convincing them vote for Bill John. They said, 'We like you, but Tim did this and that, and we don't really think we can vote for your brother.' Donn threw me under the bus said said, 'Yeah, Tim can be an ass.' I'm pretty sure they came around."

There's little doubt that quite a few "came around" because of Isabel. Everyone knew her, but not everyone

knew she was so "sassy," as Tim put it. And certainly not everyone knew she had a tattoo.

"Apparently she always wanted one; she was kind of a rebel," Bill John said. "One day they were in Fort Smith, and she told Dad to pull into a tattoo joint. So he whips in there, and she goes in and gets one. She called Tim, and he said, 'Mother, you did not.' Then she called Donn, and he said, 'You would not!' When she got around to me, I told her, 'If you want one, that's what you have to have.'"

Then she went to a Democrat Women's meeting, and Doris Hinds was also in attendance. The Hinds family is almost as famous as the Bakers; their department store, for years, was where Meigs Jewelry is now located, and both Doris and husband Bill served the community in countless ways. Doris used to write a fashion column for the Press. But most folks considered her the epitome of prim and proper.

"So Doris said to Mom, 'Heard you got a tattoo. Can I see?' Mom joked, 'Sure, if everyone chips in a dollar,'" Bill John said.

And as the story goes, Izzy revealed just a peek at her upper breast.

The tattoo was a butterfly - an almost perfect representation of who Isabel Baker was. She may have taken flight from this earth in September 2019, but the beauty and the legacy she left behind lingers among the life's garden still lovingly tended by her sons, her grandchildren and her friends.

Baker looks forward to challenges

By Jake Sermersheim

After winning three State titles, a triple crown, and setting several school and meet records, Trae Baker is officially done with his high school running career.

But as the saying goes, Baker is on to bigger and better things. Even though he won't wear a Tahlequah Tigers uniform anytime soon, he will be gearing up for the University of Central Arkansas Bears in the fall.

Since college is a different beast than high school, Baker has been using the summer to build himself up to the collegiate level. Though he ran the 5,000 kilometers in high school, he now will train for the 8K for college cross country.

"Training is pretty different. I have a training plan I follow every day," Baker said. "I build up throughout the season, meaning I do more miles every week. I'm still getting acclimated to fast, long runs, but it is helping me get into shape."

At this point in his training, he's not focusing so much on building his speed. Because of the increase in distance, Baker has been working to build himself up in a healthy way.

Week by week, the incoming freshman has been adding distance to his runs every week. Then, he will be adding distance to his training.

"A lot of it is endurance training. They are trying to build me up and make sure I peak at the right times," Baker said. "They are also trying not to over-train me and make sure I can have a long career ahead of me."

Once with the Bears, Baker has a strong high school career he is looking to build on. During his senior season, Baker made history for the Tigers. After nearly 40 years, he was the first runner to win the Triple Crown with the Tigers: Conference, Regional and State titles, all by wide margins.

In the spring, he continued his excellent senior season, setting THS



Jake Sermersheim

Former Tahlequah Tiger and future Central Arkansas Bear Trae Baker leads the pack during the two-mile race during the State Championship.

records in the 800-meter, mile and 2-mile race.

Once the postseason hit, Baker was in peak form. Despite dealing with some hot, brutal conditions during the State Tournament, Baker took the State Championship in the 2-mile race on Day 1 and picked up another State Championship in the 800-meter race on Day 2. Running around an hour after winning his second State Championship, Baker took second in the mile. To top it off, he played a key role in the 4x800 meter relay team, earning a spot on the podium.

Despite all of his accomplishments, Baker is looking fully ahead to the future.

"I get there in August. It will be fun to train with some elite guys. Not only that, it will be fun to race some elite guys as well," Baker said. "It's a new experience for me. I have never raced an 8K and it's something I'm going to have to adapt to. Sure, it's going to be hard, but it's only going to make me stronger."

Once Baker gets to the Bears this fall, he'll start training with those elite athletes.

"I have already made some friends and it's going to be fun to run with guys who will push me," Baker said. "I might just be a freshman, but I'm going to give it all I have to make an impact on the team."



Meet the Author

Jake Sermersheim is sports editor for the Tahlequah Daily Press. He holds a degree in journalism from Illinois State University and was previously sports editor at The Vidette, the Illinois State University newspaper.



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Nightlife, meet nostalgia

The infamous Squeeze Inn is long gone, but Robbie Frank has a revival in mind

By Nancy M. Garber

People of a certain age who knew Tahlequah in the 1970s are sure to recall a now-iconic bar at the corner of Morgan and Muskogee.

Situated across the street from the Redmen Shoppe, close to Northeastern State University, the Squeeze Inn attracted young people seeking live music and a partying lifestyle.

Many of the patrons were returning Vietnam veterans, often shunned by their fellow citizens, along with younger college students coming of age in a changing society. The shingled building, replete with dark corners and space to unwind, offered refuge from talk of war, civil rights unrest, and the Watergate scandal.

An informal Facebook request for “memories of the original Squeeze Inn” yielded replies best summarized as: “What happened at the Squeeze Inn stays in the past.” Reader, interpret that as you will.

When I moved here in 1985, locals were still telling stories about the bar that had closed a few years earlier. Had I foreseen that nearly 40 years later my editor and friend (Kim Poindexter, then and now) would assign a historical piece about it, I’d have paid more attention to the recollections of my colleagues. Nevertheless, the takeaway from those social media responses confirms what people were saying back then: Lifelong friendships had their beginnings and a few



Photos courtesy John Thomas

John Thomas, left, and his partner, K. Denton, of Norman, opened the Squeeze Inn in 1971.



musicians – including Tahlequah’s own Randy Crouch – launched careers within the Squeeze Inn walls.

Tahlequah businessman and entrepreneur Robbie Frank carries fond memories of good times there. After more than four decades of building successful enterprises in his hometown, Robbie is turning his energy toward reviving the Squeeze Inn name and logo, to unite a part of Tahlequah history with today’s entertainment scene.

He and his nephew, Max Steininger, are partnering to create the 21st century version of the Squeeze Inn, at the site of the old bookstore behind Sam ‘N Ellas (formerly the Redmen Shoppe), just a block from the original bar. While Squeeze Inn 2.0 will pay homage to its namesake, the focus is a modern approach, appealing to today’s youth.

So, how did the original Squeeze Inn come to be, and why was it so popular?

As the story goes, John Thomas relocated to Tahlequah in 1971 looking to start a new venture. An abandoned burger joint on Muskogee Avenue caught his eye; he saw potential for a

downtown nightspot. John borrowed the name of a business back in Norman and renovations were soon underway. His loyal patrons would come to know “the true Squeeze Inn experience,” he says, reflective of the open attitudes and turbulent times in the 1970s.

Robbie was only 17 when the doors opened, too young to legally enter a drinking establishment in Oklahoma. But he accepted an invitation from Bill Erickson, his friend who worked there, to “come down and see what was happening.” (Bill would also become a renowned area musician, an inspiration to many who played alongside him; he passed away several years ago.)

“I looked older than my age, so I just started hanging out there,” Robbie says.

Like many others, he formed lifetime friendships with folks like Charles Tannehill and Michael Paine – well-known local wood artisans, who are working alongside him now to build the new Squeeze Inn.

John recalls a feeling of community during the bar’s early years.

“It was built around the love of music and feeling free and young. This imprinted on all of our memories in our 20s. It was a subculture happening in Tahlequah,” he said.

To this day, there remains a measure of notoriety. For instance, consider the legend of a photo published in *Playboy Magazine* around the mid-1970s depicting streakers on Muskogee Avenue, with the Squeeze Inn in the background. This snapshot evidently earned Tahlequah the magazine’s designation, for the moment, as the No. 1 party town in the country. And there’s ongoing speculation that a vending company representative out of Muskogee who approached John about providing game equipment for the bar had ties to the Chicago mafia.

When John sold the Squeeze Inn in 1977, “it was no longer as fun,” Robbie remembers. Once it permanently closed, the building remained

abandoned for several years, and was eventually demolished. The site is now the home of Norris Park.

Robbie’s purchase of the old bookstore building in 2022 was a “speculative buy” that sparked conversation between the two friends about reviving the Squeeze Inn. Late last year, work began on gutting the building and constructing a unique redux of the original nightspot. Under Robbie’s experienced eye, the process has been steady and precise.

The oldest of three boys born to Pat and the late Robert Frank, Robbie played centerfield for the 1971 state championship baseball team at Tahlequah High School. On June 6, 1968, at the end of seventh grade, he began “courting” Cathy Turk, who had just completed sixth grade. They married in 1979. Today, Cathy is an attorney; the couple have one son, Turk.

Robbie was inspired by his uncle, Lloyd Cunningham, himself a Tahlequah native and successful entrepreneur, to pursue a business career. In 1981, he founded RobBilt, sold it 10 years later, and established Wolf



Local legend Randy Crouch is one of many musicians who performed on stage at the Squeeze Inn, at the site of present-day Norris Park.

Barn Co., which he also sold, then went on to build two successful float operations – Riverbend Floats and Riverbend by the River, which continue under new ownership today. He also developed Teehee Addition and has built other homes around town.

The goal of his latest venture is straightforward: “I want this to be a place where people can dance the night away, where people can come and let their hair down for a few hours, and not have to think about the goings-on of the world around us.”

Plans are to offer a late afternoon “happy hour” on the outdoor courtyard, complete with live music, to appeal to the more “mature” crowd (read: those who were likely patrons of the original Squeeze Inn). Later in the evening, the focus will be on music indoors for the younger crowd.

While Robbie oversees construction of the venue, Max will handle day-to-day operations and booking musical acts.

“Max and I have been talking to musicians and have been contacted by several who would like to play as soon as we open,” he said.

Opening date will be announced when the two agree everything is in order.

“You only get one chance for a first impression. From facilities to service to product, it all needs to be shipshape and ready the day we open,” he said.

Though Robbie insists that in his



Photo courtesy Robbie Frank

Cathy and Robbie Frank on a recent trip to New Orleans.

business pursuits, “I’ve been lucky,” he refuses to take shortcuts.

“It’s important to pay attention to detail, customer service, and make the experience special,” he said. “Anybody buying a product, you’ve


got to make them want to come back and tell their friends about it.”

And when that happens, people will likely be talking about the Squeeze Inn, old and new, for another 50 years.



Meet the Author

Nancy M. Garber is a former member of the TDP news and advertising teams and retired director of Communications and Marketing at NSU. She first met Ed Edmondson in 1987, as a news reporter on a trip to Oklahoma City with Ed Brocksmith and Ed Fite to meet with Gov. Henry Bellmon. A longtime supporter of STIR, she has served on the board for the past decade.



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Something's afoot

Power walking part of Nannette Jones' claim to local fame

By Greg Combs

Although the facts may be disputed, experts studying such matters generally agree the animal that is today's human stood up and walked on two legs around seven million years ago.

It was a process, not "Mildred, I'm going to the office," Dad said when crawling off to work, then returning that evening walking tall on two legs and talking about "bipedalism," which is what wordsmiths call walking on two legs. Who knows?

It is further understood that on those two legs, humans walked the earth, with the aid of boats and early beasts of burden, finding their way to the far reaches while filling in most of the planet's nooks and all of its crannies. One thing for sure: This beast was made for walking. And this is true, had a divine force designed us as is, had we evolved, or had we gotten our chassis via a ranching mothership. Or, all of the above.

Jump ahead seven million years or so. You would have found Nannette Jones, of Cherokee County, enjoying regular walks with the ladies from BancFirst, an informal group of bank employees who stepped in and around Tahlequah for a time. Too early for the present trail system, the group toured neighborhoods, assaulting Depot Hill, breaching Bluff Avenue, and touring greater Dogtown and environs.

"That group is what led me to competitive walking," Nannette said. "I was at the 2017 Senior National Games in



The area presents opportunities to pace off short-, medium- and long-distance racing against time and others. Here Nan Jones steps off in a recent race at Pryor.

Albuquerque as a triathlete. The walking competition was 'open,' I entered, and soon was in a 5K walking race."

She had hiked around town but this "walking" had rules, and she knew nothing of them, only that she could step off the upcoming 3.1 miles.

"Race Walking"? In the years following the American Civil War and into the 1890s, such races were a national craze. This country's penchant for games and gambling fueled the sport, which well exceeded other sports of the day. The top Pedestrian in America was Edward Payson Weston. He made a good living outwalking racers, both cross country and on public tracks.

So, one of those Town Walkers from BancFirst was a triathlete, competing in events wherein racers swim a distance, race a bicycle road course, then run a foot race. Nannette Norris Jones, daughter of a Tampa, Florida, police officer, prep distance runner, graduate of Southern Illinois University, mother, grandmother, U.S. Navy retiree, and wife of Doy Jones, of Peggs, was among those bank bipedalists.

The walking race craze had abated by Oklahoma statehood as cars took to the roads and gambling found new venues. The first Indy 500 was held in 1911. In subsequent years, three American presidents worried that their countrymen were becoming unfit. Theodore Roosevelt challenged Marine Corps officers to walk 50 miles in 20 hours. Dwight Eisenhower was alarmed that European kids out tested Americans in fitness.

He noted a lack of walking, especially the disappearing walk to school. High school lots were full of cars.

In the early 1960s, John F. Kennedy urged Americans to get fit. The President's Council on Physical Fitness, with Bud Wilkinson as its first chairman, developed an exercise plan that school boards, gym teachers, parents, and the public in general supported and adopted. At the same time, the fashionable and fully voluntary "Kennedy Walk," which challenged participants to walk - as Teddy urged his Marines - 50 miles in 20 hours arose. This was a short-lived but strong global



The core of the Town Walkers post in front of BancFirst. From the top are: Nanette Jones, Tammy DeLaRosa, Jennifer Dollarhide, and Barbara Higginbotham.

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phenomenon. Kennedy marches are still held, with most scattered around Europe.

If competitive walking requires dedication, stamina, and purpose, then Nan Jones has the credentials. She joined the Navy in 1980, trained at the Hospital Corps School, served alongside the Marines in hospitals and in the field, and saw some of the world – including Diego Garcia, a speck in the Indian Ocean, where she met Doy Jones, a chief petty officer machinist’s mate. She drank the waters of Camp Lejeune, and retired as a chief petty officer in 2000 in good health.

Then in Oklahoma, and with all those medical and hospital experiences, her degree in Health Care Management from SIU, and as a military veteran she had reached a fork in the road, and she took it.

“I wanted to go to work. There was a position at BancFirst in customer service. I applied and was hired,” she said.

She served at the downtown Tahlequah branch, not only stepping out around the village with her work-

mates, but rising in management until her retirement in 2020, having had two employers in 40 years.

Competitive walking, formerly known as pedestrianism, requires proper technique. Race walking and power walking are variations of the fast walk, when a person must have a foot touching the ground at all times.

“Both types require judges to observe walkers. I am a power walker, which is less technical. That is what that first race was at Nationals,” she said. “I put my head down for the 5K and walked as fast as I could. I finished fifth.”

She has since studied and practiced the technique, cutting her times down,

next competing in the Fort Lauderdale nationals, despite a competitive downturn due to the pandemic. The Senior Games resumed last year, with Pittsburgh hosting. In 2025, seniors will compete at Iowa City, Iowa.

So, with no time for Edward Weston’s story, the reader may find his exploits, colorful personage and get a good look at America in 1909 in “The Last Great Walk,” a book by Wayne Curtis. Published in 2014, it tells of pedestrianism, the arrival of the automobile, walking for health and Weston’s walk from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

In fact, there is a bookstore in Tulsa 50 miles from Tahlequah. One should be able to walk there in under 20 hours.



Meet the Author

Greg Combs is a former reporter for the Pictorial Press. He was a state prosecutor in Texas and Oklahoma, a Cherokee Nation planner and staff attorney, and was elected District Attorney in 1990, after which he served Northeastern State University as the school’s attorney, as a dean, assistant dean and chair of the Department of Criminal Justice and Legal Studies. He also taught Law of the Press to NSU journalism students. He and wife, Alicia, live in Tahlequah.



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TAHLEQUAH DAILY PRESS
2024 Cutest Babies

Stetson Purscelley is 1 year old and was born May 9, 2023. Parents are Coy and Laci Purscelley, of Tahlequah. Grandparents are Kevin and Connie Chandler, and Mark and Deana Purscelley. From Stetson: "Mommy and Daddy call me 'Booger.' I love watching movies with Mommy and Daddy. My favorite snack is yogurt. Bath time is my favorite. I love swimming, and I love playing in the water."



Presley Ann Jackson was born Oct. 13, 2023. Parents are Morgan Jackson, of Tahlequah, and Shiloh Jackson, of Southwest City, Missouri. Mom's occupation is K-9 Acres Pet Resort, and Dad works for Elevation Enterprises LLC. Presley's grandparents are Shawn and Heidi Carter, and Ron and Tracy Jackson. From Presley: "I love all the puppies at mommy's work! My favorite food is fruit. I love going to job sites with my daddy and bossing people around."



Dollee Daugherty is 8 months old and was born Sept. 6, 2023. Parents are Chyna Chupco and Justin Daugherty, both of Tahlequah. Dad is employed at Tahlequah Public Works Authority. His hobbies are hunting and fishing. Mom is a student, and her hobby is spending time with Dollee. Grandparents are Tschanre Dorset and Tommy Chupco; Susan and JoeDale Greenhaw; and Jimmy and Kristin Daugherty. From Collee: "My family calls me D.J., Heruse ("beautiful" in Mvskoke) or Uwodu ("beautiful" in Tsalagi). I like rolling, jumping, listening to music, and trying new foods. My favorite place to sleep is in the car."



Flynn Henson, 19 months, was born Oct. 6, 2023. Parents are Ashton Henson, of Tahlequah, and Peyton Henson, of Stigler. Mom is vice president and loan officer at Local Bank and Dad is the branch administrator at Local Bank. Grandparents are Lisa Bower and Gary Thurman, and Kevin and Courtney Henson. From Flynn: "My mom and dad call me Flynny. My best friends are my puppies, Gypsy and Ellie. I enjoy always being outside and hanging with my momma!"



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What's in a name?

Some long-forgotten communities have colorful history

By Layce Gardner

“What's in a name?” wrote William Shakespeare in his play, “Romeo and Juliet.”

The question was posed to demonstrate the irrelevancy of names. Relevant or not, our Oklahoma forefathers showed great ingenuity in naming their communities. Some of those communities still exist today; many do not.

It is fitting that many towns and counties in Oklahoma are named after Native American tribes or prominent Native Americans. Such is the case with Cherokee County, Miami, Muskogee, and Tahlonteeskee.

Tahlonteeskee was founded in 1828 near the mouth of the Illinois River and became the capital of the “Old Settlers” in the Cherokee Nation. Chief John Jolly named the town after his late brother. In 1839, after the Trail of Tears, the capital was moved to Tahlequah. Tahlonteeskee is known as the oldest governmental capital in Oklahoma. Today, it is barren land near Gore.

According to Dr. Brad Agnew, history professor emeritus at Northeastern State University, the naming of many towns was left up to the general postmaster. Oftentimes, there was only a general store where mail was delivered to the scattered residents of the community. Postmasters named towns after themselves, their wives, children, or prominent citizens. Such is the case with Briggs, Scraper, Luckey, and Ellerville.

A plethora of towns in Oklahoma were named after women, and not all these women came from the area. When postmasters sent a form to Washington, D.C., to apply for town status, they often forgot to include the potential name of the town. That left the naming up to the person who collected the applications. That person spent three decades naming Oklahoma towns after their loved ones, office clerks, or pretty women he happened to meet. What better way to show your devotion than to name a town after your intended?

Lost City is north of State Highway 51 between Hulbert and Tahlequah. It is a name that conjures many stories. Some say Lost City was named because it was so far removed



A portrait of Chief John Jolly was created by renowned artist George Catlin.



from any towns or roads that its inhabitants appeared to be lost. But that's the boring story. Another story is much more imaginative. Folklore has it that Lost City was a small community inhabited by Native Americans. One day, the entire community was there – and the next day, it wasn't. Homes and belongings were still there, and even the campfires were still burning, but there were no people. What happened to the inhabitants is anyone's guess. They were simply lost.

Interestingly, Lost City was the site of the first meteorite fall in the U.S. to be recorded by a camera network. Maybe it should've been renamed Meteor?

Tenkiller Ferry Lake is a manmade reservoir formed by the damming of the Illinois River. The community of Chrometer, a settlement in the Cookson area, was moved before the damming. Several buildings and foundations of buildings are all that is left of Chrometer, which is now submerged beneath Tenkiller's water.

Tenkiller Ferry Lake, aka Tenkiller Lake, was named after a prominent Cherokee family that owned a ferry used to cross the Illinois River. Of course, local legend suggests the lake was so named because the Cherokee ferryman had 10 notches on his bow, one notch for each white man he had killed. It makes for a good story, though it is probably not true.

Salina, north of Locust Grove, is the oldest permanent settlement in Oklahoma, founded in 1796. Lewis Ross, brother of Cherokee Principal Chief John Ross, built a farm and large home on the present-day site of the town. The community was destroyed during the Civil War, leaving behind only the brick house. In 1872, the house was given to the Cherokee Nation and used as an orphanage. A post office was founded, and the settlement was officially named Cherokee Orphan Asylum. The orphanage burned in 1903. There were no casualties, but the children were moved to other orphanages in the area. The town changed its name to Salina in 1884 because of the nearby saltworks.

Oklahoma was home to 50 all-Black towns before 1920. Today, only 13 of those towns are still in existence. Melvin was an all-Black community in Cherokee County, according to local historian Beth Herrington.

"Melvin was a Black settlement – not a town – a few miles from Hulbert," Herrington said.

A topographical map showed a dozen residences, a church, and a school, as reported in the *Tahlequah Daily Press*.

"There was a Black doctor who practiced in Hulbert, but lived in Melvin," Herrington said. "He was well-respected, but at night, he had to get out of Hulbert because they had sundown laws."

One of the reasons so many all-Black settlements were born was because of the sundown laws. Sundown laws stated no Black people could remain in the town after sundown, or they would face dire consequences. Many of the signs featured racial epitaphs with the words, "Don't let the sun go down on you here."

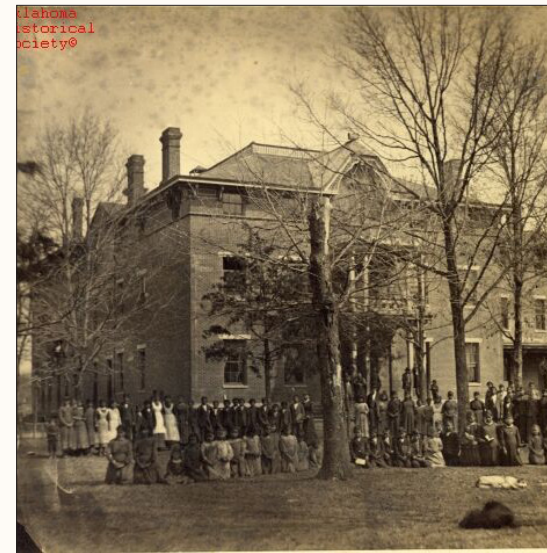
Metory was five miles southwest of Tahlequah. The name comes from the first letter of the last names of the

six families who lived there. Metory was a community that was eventually swallowed by the bigger community of Woodall.

Then there are the communities named after other places. It was a way for the citizens to pay homage to their native lands – or to pretend they were somewhere else. Such towns are Kansas, Yonkers, and Cleveland.

Sam Houston even had a hand in naming one Oklahoma community. In 1829, Houston married a Cherokee woman and opened a trading post. He named the site Wigwam Neosho. Wigwam Neosho existed near Fort Gibson and the Neosho River on U.S. Highway 69.

At one time in Oklahoma, there was even an all-female town named Bathsheba. No men were allowed inside the city limits. As the legend goes, several men were shot and killed when they dared approach the town. But that's a story for another day.



Wikimedia Commons

An old photo depicts the old orphanage in Salina before it burned down.



Meet the Author

Layce Gardner graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Theater from Northeastern State University. She is a playwright, screenwriter, novelist, and special writer for the *Tahlequah Daily Press*.

Roughing it under the stars

Camping in Green Country can be memorable experience

By Rob Anderson

As a kid, sleeping under the stars was my first real-world adventure.

I went from building tents in the dining room with Mom's best blankets, to constructing lean-tos in the pasture with fallen limbs and brush. I became chief of my tribe in an instant. That's why camping, or sleeping outside, remains one of life's best experiences. Get tough, rough it, and test your pioneer skills. Live Indigenously. I did, and I still do.

If this sounds familiar, you can relive your childhood daydreams anywhere along the banks of the Illinois River, on the shores of Tenkiller Lake, or in a neighboring spot like Greenleaf State Park near Braggs. Each beautiful and historical location offers outdoor or indoor sleeping options, from primitive or RV hook-up camping to cabin and lodge settings for those wanting modern accommodations after spending the day smelling the dirt, water, and trees all around them. Whatever the heart desires, a spot to call home away from home can be found, including sites with ADA arrangements.

The Illinois River, in the southern reaches of the Boston Mountains – part of the Ozarks – offers 60 miles of outdoor enjoyment anywhere along the path it flows through the Cookson Hills. Visitors can take in the river's beauty in many ways. Floating by way of canoe, kayak,



Several lakes in the area entice visitors.

or an inflatable raft is the popular choice, but many people also opt for the lazy river way via inner tube. Swimming skills are necessary, as river recreation requires respect of water conditions and constant weather changes. Many local outfitters are available to help with planning and preparing for a successful and safe float trip.

For those who pretended to be Jacques-Yves Cousteau when diving deep into the local swimming pool, Tenkiller State Park can become the deep sea for the day. The lake has been measured to be 160 feet deep in some areas, with clear water conditions as deep as 28 feet. Tenkiller Lake is widely known for its scuba diving, but the traditional activities of swimming, water skiing, fishing, and other forms of lake play bring

visitors back every summer. This Oklahoma State Park is near Vian, but visitors can also obtain easy access to Tenkiller Lake at Cherokee Landing State Park near Park Hill.

Easy access to heaven-like terrain is available at the family-friendly Greenleaf State Park, which also presents connections to primitive peoples and history. According to the state park literature provided to guests, "The oak-hickory forest of the western Ozarks, known as the Greenleaf Hills, provided homes for numerous prehistoric Indians."

The park's literature goes on to say, "Archaeologists suggest that for most of the Caddoan Period the area was peripheral to ceremonial centers and potentially contained isolated hamlets or seasonal camps." Today, visitors,

including those with ADA requirements, can enjoy equal access to the lake, camp sites, hiking trails, guided activities presented by the Discovery Center, and a splash pad, as well as endless wildlife sightings. Visitors are urged to leave no trace, and not feed the wildlife.

Camping enthusiasts can find outdoor adventure in any of these locations, as each site offers something to experience and enjoy year-round. For more information on the Illinois River, go to TravelOK.com, or contact one of the float trip outfitters. Information on Lake Tenkiller State Park can be obtained at the same website or by calling the park office at 918-776-8180. Details for Greenleaf State Park are available via the TravelOK.com, or by calling 918-487-5622.

Trip planners are urged to reserve a camp site or book lodging as soon as Mother Nature calls, as each park is popular and campsites may already be claimed. Happy trails!



Greenleaf State Park offers a variety of activities, including kayaking, canoeing, fishing, guided activities provided by the Discovery Center - and cooling off at the splashpad.



Meet the Author

Rob Anderson is a former staff writer and sports editor for TDP, having done three stints with the newspaper. An avid outdoor enthusiast, he has been working as an English teacher in the Oklahoma City metro area.



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British needles, the damage done

A look back at life as a diabetic in a new country

By Dan Strayer

When I left Oklahoma, by way of my original home in South-Central Pennsylvania, I had somewhat insulated myself from the wider world.

Life in Tahlequah in those days meant no cell phones, no neon-colored iPods, and athletic heroes who refused to talk about the past. Indeed, I prided myself on not having a phone.

Fast forward nearly two decades, and I'm in Manchester, England. Now, I'm the guy with dated GIFs on work chats, using my phone on the tram. Adaptability and fatherhood have clearly been the biggest changes, and both play off of each other frequently.

But there's another key difference to life in the UK for an American expat: health care. And I'll say it here definitively: It's an absolute pleasure to not face financial ruin for managing my Type 1 diabetes. When I returned home to the U.S. in July 2023 and insulin was drying up, it was a head scratcher to discover my travel insurance didn't cover it. The harrowing reality of affordable prescriptions is a luxury many American Type 1 diabetics lack.

Somewhere, Martin Shkerli is smiling. (In case you don't know, he co-founded a hedge fund, as well as pharmaceutical firms. He did time for financial crimes, but I need not mention his wealth.)

What is this place we call Manchester? With regard to our blue-collar city in Northwest England, my mother back in Pennsylvania only knew



Dan Strayer is back in his element, with a bat in his hands.

the lead singer from the Monkees was from here.

But you can't monkey around in Manchester. In fact, life here is so fast that even Brits – as well as expats like me – need time to adjust. While some here see me and my condition as that of a “medical tourist,” the reality is that my unique migration pattern is about love and a fresh start. The Home Office will likely be glad to know that in spite of giving me medicine and needles to live for free, I've repaid it in full by adapting to the British way of life. Sarcasm and self-deprecation, for instance, are traits I've learned to embrace.

But it wasn't a smooth transition. My past attitude – especially due to how diabetes dominates my life – has long made me defensive. Here, I've grown up and realized blaming the world doesn't work. For a diabetic Browns fan, that's tougher to do than one might think.

Manchester is a city that thrives on a playful rivalry with London. It's really an inferiority complex driven derby in

much the same way that Philadelphia envies New York. Manchester, ultimately, is a blue-collar city with grit and a strong work ethic to match both. The pandemic highlighted Manchester's spirit: Known for its resilience, the city has bounced back. Offices and streets are truly alive again.

I found connection here both through sports and family. But I need to confess that despite moving here for love, marriage didn't take. I put that on my own shoulders: My ex saved my life multiple times due to my struggle to control diabetes – including once when I was in Tahlequah. The pandemic solidified an inevitable separation, but I'm now managing my condition with prescribed continuous glucose monitors, a free device from the National Health Service.

Make no mistake about this: It's a relief not to worry about burdensome prescription costs. But the bigger relief is that someone sacrificed their love of a spouse to repeatedly save the



One of Dan's dogs is Diggory Doo. At his birth, Dan's daughter, Adali, named him, noticing the cockapoo's habit of burrowing and digging.



Adali Lois Strayer poses with her cake for her 16th birthday in May.

life of what amounted to a baby daddy with the self-managing skills of a child. Harsh as that is to write, I've the perspective to appreciate that I wasn't easy to live with, and I'm alive because of her. And our daughter has two involved parents in the picture.

As I've gotten better with my control, I've found other modes of satisfaction that make life in Manchester worth the move. That's thanks in part to the Manchester Screwballs, my co-ed slow-pitch softball team. The Screwballs embody the cosmopolitan nature of the city: new, eager, always bringing joy to the week. This inclusive group of expats and locals is a source of camaraderie and competition: from Nicaragua, Venezuela, Liverpool, the Czech Republic, Australia, Canada, and other locations that will surely leave you knowing



they're not here for the weather.

Why "the Screwballs," you ask? We wear pink and blue uniforms, and use a type of British ice cream as our mascot. Based on how things are going this season, you may not know we're there to win, but you will definitely see us coming.

And I still ask myself this question: "Who's the parent: Me or my teenage daughter?"

Parenting a teenager surely comes with its own set of challenges, but you wouldn't know it with my daughter, Adali. She's just like that flour: self-raising. Talented and driven, Adali excels in theatre and music. This fall, she commences on the British version of senior high school. It's a sixth-form college in Liverpool with a focus on the performing arts, known colloquially as LIPA.

Personally speaking, my having diabetes adds another layer to our dynamic.

We openly discuss my condition, and her presence helps me manage it better. This transparency is crucial, as she's been there for me during past episodes. By my talking to her, she's come to appreciate the vulnerability that living with diabetes presents. It forces me to accept help, but it also pushes her to take on responsibility and a level of awareness.

I appreciate how burdensome it must be to take on a parental approach when you're actually the child. But it's irrelevant, so long as we'd both prefer that I were here. And to see how she's grown – and how much I can influence that growth – shows me I made the right choice coming here in the first place.

All told, life as a Manc Yank with a pre-existing condition has been a very positive experience, one I'm not sure would've been realised in some American Smalltown buried under the weight of privatized health care concerns.

Meet the Author

Dan Strayer was sports editor for TDP during 2004 and 2005. To his horror, he discovered there was no American football in England, and became a digital marketer. He lives in Bury, Manchester, UK with his daughter, Adali, and two cockapoos, Diggory and Coco. We've left the British spellings and colloquialisms in this piece.

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