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LETTER FROM HYDEN, KENTUCKY

by James Reston, Jr.

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Seven years have passed since I was last in Hyden, and at first glance the changes seem dramatic. For one thing, the tiny, secluded village of five hundred is far easier to reach than it used to be. Traveling from London, forty-five miles to the West, along the newly opened Daniel Boone Parkway is bliss compared to the struggle along windy, chug-holed, coal-strewn roads that once were the only access. The new parkway is a good way for reacquainting oneself with the region. Once you get into the hills, hills "steep as a cat's face," as the expression goes, the road cuts great canyons through, and the natural wealth is superbly displayed. The seams of coal gleam in the sun. Rusty water bleeds from sheer limestone faces. Great swatches of oil shale, close to coal in the evolutionary process, the geologists say, are evident. The only resource you can not see on this dramatic drive is the huge deposit of oil and gas, deep underneath, which is said to be the last great untapped oil field in America.

Once in Leslie County, you turn off the parkway at a sign marked "Hyden Spur," whose railroad terminology has a certain wistfulness to it, because there is no rail head at Hyden--for years politicians have claimed that as a goal, and, of course, never fulfilled it--and the coal must be trucked out to Hazard or Manchester in the behemoth-like Mack trucks behind which it is best not to get caught. The general appearance of the land and the people is improved. The roads are not quite so strewn with trash as they once were.

Mobile homes have replaced the classic Appalachian shacks of the sixties, with the laundry strung across their porches, and gleaming new pick-ups are usually parked outside now. It's even hard to find an old junked car, ditched in a creek bed along these streams. And high in the hills, the scars from the strip mines do not seem quite so murderous.

Yet, this is a land of contradictions. With all this wealth below ground, and some new-found wealth above, squalid poverty, though not nearly so evident as before, still exists in quantity. Over half of Leslie County is below the poverty line, and at the height of the winter a third of the county is on food stamps--and yet, there is only a six percent unemployment rate. Broad-shouldered capitalism is touted by all, but still, few areas of America have been so victimized by the whims of the market. The rabidly loyal Nixonite, Judge C. Allen Muncy, has based his campaigns for County Judge on harsh jail terms for crooks and thugs. Greasy Creek is the only pure stream in the county. When Richard Nixon spoke here of Kentucky as the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln and of Jefferson Davis, the audience clapped with equal fervor for both, and the band played "Dixie" and the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" with equal gusto. In the county's celebration not only of its own Centennial but of July Fourth, American freedoms were much mentioned in an atmosphere where freedom of speech was as tightly controlled as I have ever seen it in this decade. People will say in one breath that Watergate was no real blemish on the Nixon presidency, and in the next will talk in indignant tones about their own Watergates over the years. They love Nixon, and they complain, some brave ones, that their Judge is acting just like Nixon--hard and vindictive and tyrannical.

It is a place of great energy, of wild dreams, of rackets and schemes. Men move mountains here, and bridle at the new strip-mining law that requires

them to replace the mountain the way it was before they took the coal. The coal operators say plaintively that if enforcement of the new law comes gradually, they can probably stay in business, but the Federals say it would probably take their entire national force to police mining and pollution laws here, and so generally they do not bother. Visionaries see long, sparkling cities built along the tops of these mountains on old strip mine benches, stretching from Virginia to Tennessee (there is already a housing experiment of one hundred forty family units in nearby Letcher County along an old spoil bank) or they see lush pasture land where once bulldozers and huge augur machines ~~were~~ were. In Breathitt County to the north, the Falcon Coal Company is growing grapes in the acid soil above Jackson, Kentucky, and hopes soon that they will be transformed into wine. Last year, the first Kentucky mountain wine, from the grapes of a vintner near Paris, Kentucky, was tasted in a showy occasion in Lexington.

But the boom spirit is dispelling somewhat in the coal fields. The bonanza began in 1974 with the Arab oil embargo, and was fueled by the anticipation of the United Mine Workers strike. Several major utilities switched from oil to coal, and the push to stockpile coal was great. In the first year, a ton of coal rose as high as \$35. Suddenly there was work for everyone at wages comparable to the rest of the country. In Leslie County, where there are no union mines, the average wage rose to \$70 a shift, or about \$16,500 a year. In Pike County, where one of Bethlehem Steel's Beth Elkhorn mines is located, the wages were nearly double that, and Pike County, almost overnight, became one of the wealthiest counties in the state.

But then, with the coal strike, Western and mid-Western coal started to take a growing share of the market. Japanese and European demand slumped off, and the L&N Railroad, which serves the Eastern Kentucky coal fields,

experienced a near breakdown in its ability to provide a sufficient number of gondolas, and is now under an ICC investigation as a result. Somewhere between seven and ten million tons of coal lie idle at the tipple now, unable to move to market, and in Letcher County eleven mines consequently went bankrupt last year. The price of coal has dropped to \$18 a ton, and Eastern Kentucky is once again at the caprice of the corporate executive. What would happen, people are beginning to ask, if the great coal users should decide that Western or mid-Western coal is more convenient and cheaper to extract? Some see the possibility of a coal boom nationally (in an effort to meet President Carter's goal of triple the coal production by 1985), and a coal slump locally.

But the corporate world of these mountains is far different from the world of the man up the hollows. "Two things are important in Eastern Kentucky," the colorful mayor of Hazard in the sixties, Willie Dawahare, once said: "Coal and Dole, and Dole is biggest." This is the land of the wink and the nudge in one's side. "Everybody's got a racket here," one Leslie Countian told me. His was rocking chairs, and he hoped to present one to the former President on the stage of the Richard Nixon Gymnasium before national television. It was not to occur, because the craftsman happened to be a close relative of George Wooten, Judge Muncy's chief political rival in Leslie County. But then Muncy and Wooten are second cousins, so being related does not necessarily make a friend here.

Leslie County is an old county, not so much historically as demographically. Sixty-four percent of the population was over sixty-five years of age in 1970. Yet, if the population is old and trusting and uneducated for the most part, the county government has been taken over by a handful of young, well-educated, and often ruthless professionals. Perhaps of more concern than the average

schooling of eight grades here is the appalling statistic of mental and physical disability. Kentucky Department of Health figures show that one-quarter of the young in the county between the ages of six and nineteen have mental or physical disabilities. This raises the most emotional issue now debated among the students of mountain life: the effects of inbreeding caused genetic deterioration. As one might expect, it has been Harry M. Caudill, the passionate crusader against strip mining in the 1960s, who has once again provoked his fellow mountaineers. In his recent work Caudill argues that flight from the hills and frequent intermarriage over the years has adversely affected the genetic viability of an already inferior stock of people who were, to begin with, the dregs of English society. In Watches of the Night, Caudill even suggests that a military base in Eastern Kentucky might be the answer to raising the quality of the gene pool.

Caudill's argument is considered dangerous by some scholars of the mountains.

"Many think Harry's tripped a wire somewhere," said a sociologist at the Appalachian Center at the University of Kentucky said, and reviews of Caudill's new work have sometimes played off the titles of his old, like "Night Comes to the Chromosomes," or "My Genes are Dying." But a doctor for the pioneering Frontier Nursing Service, which has been operating in Leslie County since 1925, said he would be hard put to dispute Caudill's argument in light of the figures on the mental and physical disability. He could find comfort in the fact, however, that, primarily through the midwifery service in "outposts" up the creeks, the birth rate of the county has fallen from a 1960 level comparable to India's (forty-one births per thousand) to a rate just above the national average today.

Still, the tiny ~~parish~~^{dominion}/that young Judge Muncy has built in Leslie

County in the past five years has played heavily off the benightedness of his county: the oldness, the joy of boom and fear of bust, the rackets and the wild dreams, the poverty and illiteracy and genetic disorder--and made it possible to impose his own political beliefs so totally on his citizens.

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C. Allen Muncy, the thirty-one-year-old judge executive whose idea it was to bring Richard Nixon to Hyden, is a stocky, puffy-cheeked bachelor who has always carried his zealous conservatism openly. He set out to be a career army officer when he left Hyden for Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond. There he joined the ROTC program and had ambitions of transferring to West Point. But after majoring in history, the moment for commissioning came, and Muncy was declared unfit and given a 4-F classification. His shock over the rejection brought him near a nervous breakdown, and for days he sat alone in his dormitory room.

But Muncy was a fine student, and he went on to law school at the University of Kentucky. Eastern Kentucky University had been somewhat behind the times; neither the war protest nor even marijuana had reached there during Muncy's tenure. But at U.K., Muncy encountered "the peace and love generation." He found the protesters abusive. He was horrified at their references to Nixon as a traitor and a fascist and at their practice of shouting down the President's defenders. In retaliation, Muncy and friends turned speakers from his stereo around in his window and blasted the theme song from "Patton" across the courtyard. Also at U.K., Muncy formed his impression of the press. "They reported only what the protesters said, and not what we said," and so when the press came to Leslie County last week, Muncy's defensiveness and suspicion were evident.

In 1972 Muncy returned to Hyden and went into law practice with McKinnley Morgan, a classmate in high school and law school, and now the county attorney. A year later Muncy was at a party where hoodlums came late and, for no apparent reason, shot his nephew in the head. That incident brought the lawlessness of the county home to him. In that summer there had been thirteen killings, five up one creek alone. The twenty-seven-year-old lawyer decided to challenge the powerful George Wooten, the county judge for twelve years and sheriff for four years before that.

Wooten, now sixty-two, is one of the great raconteurs of Eastern Kentucky. A great barrel-chested man with the body of a forty-year-old, ^{tough-grained} ~~rough~~ face, and silver hair, Wooten grew up on Devil's Jump Branch on Hell for Certain Creek, "the only place in the county," he says, "where you can go swimming in your birthday suit, drink from the same stream, jump seven feet from a rock into a swimming hole, screaming like a maniac, and nobody will bother you."

Wooten had been good for Leslie County in the years of despair in the 1960s, where the force of his personality and his turn of phrase could interest government officials and writers alike. When John F. Kennedy started a meager employment program in the early sixties for unemployed fathers, Wooten dubbed the beneficiaries "Happy Pappies," and the name attached to the program throughout the mountains. But at a time when unemployment was running as high as forty percent and the county judge controlled a very few public jobs, Wooten naturally made his enemies. His story-telling skills far exceeded his administrative skills, and he was somewhat vulnerable politically over questions about the use of relief money that poured into the county after the devastating 1963 flood, and about the use of road equipment.

When Muncy announced his challenge for the Republican nomination for county judge--the only nomination that has mattered here since the Civil War;

there has never been a democratic primary in memory--Wooten called the upstart "green as a gourd" and "a little green apple waiting to be picked," but the old power underestimated the challenger, particularly his planning abilities, and Muncy won the election by twenty-eight votes.

In his first term Muncy consolidated his power. He surrounded himself with a few friends who had been his high school classmates in the mid-sixties and who had returned as professionals. They identified the power centers in the county: the county judgeship; the school superintendency, which controlled nearly as much public money flowing into the county as the judge; the county attorney's office, which controlled all local prosecutions. And they needed to control the Democratic Party as well, amounting to one-third of the registered voters, for then they would have a conduit to the Democratic governor in Frankfort, and a handle on Democratic patronage as well as Republican, and total control of the election process. By the time Richard Nixon came to Hyden the youth coup was complete. In 1977, McKinnley Morgan, thirty-one, ran unopposed as a Democrat for county attorney. Edmond Collett, an attorney who practices beneath his family store high near the headwaters of the Kentucky River, became the chairman of the Democratic Party and the contact for the county with Democratic Governor Julian Carroll. And Robert Bowling, thirty-one, Muncy's campaign manager, took over as superintendent of schools.

"Once I won," Muncy told me, "we decided the only way we could keep it, and make things happen as we would like to see it, was by taking over both parties and the school system, and we've accomplished all that. Now, we hope we can realize our goals of improving the economy, the environment, the school system, and the roads."

The ever-tightening youth hegemony brought results. With revenue-sharing money, the sheriff's department got uniforms and cars. With a junked car

program, over 2,500 old wrecks were removed from the streams, although the real reason for that success was that the price per car rose to \$15 at the junkyard. A garbage tax of ten percent was imposed, and next year Muncy expects to have dumpsters throughout the county.

But the price has been an atmosphere of autocracy. Very quietly, with a sense of fear, people talk of the "dictatorship at Hyden," and how "this man rules as tightly as the Czar of Russia ever did." Reports of Muncy retaliation against his detractors are rife. One report had Muncy threatening to arrest drivers for overweight coal trucks when their boss spoke out in opposition--in a place where all coal trucks are overweight and, therefore, in technical violation of the law. Another report had Muncy saying to an official: "Any person who openly opposes President Nixon's visit to Hyden will not work for the county, the state, or the school system, nor will he work for any private enterprise I have authority over."

Several weeks before Nixon's visit, Muncy paid a call on the head of the Frontier Nursing Service, Dr. W. A. Rogers Beasley, and demanded that he control any show of opposition by "outside" doctors on his staff. This put Dr. Beasley in a difficult spot, because to continue the effectiveness of his unique organization in the hills, he had to get along with local officials. But members of his staff were outspoken in their criticism of a county which would spend \$2.6 million on a recreation center but had no full-time ambulance service. Equally troublesome for Dr. Beasley was the fact that wealthy, urban, and largely liberal donors were the core of financial support for his rural medicine service, and some of these were threatening to withdraw their support over the Nixon visit, evidently feeling that the people of Leslie County were beyond help.

By the time I arrived in Hyden, five days before Nixon, the county seemed to speak with one voice about the pride (and surprise) they felt that the former President would honor them so. The surface unanimity was elaborate and, generally, all that was reported: this was a Republican county three to one, going back to the Civil War, full of independent people who resented the attacks made on Nixon and the invasion of his privacy. The Congressman of the district, Rep. Tim Lee Carter, a medical doctor whose opponents have claimed "retired to Congress," was present at "the last supper" of Congressmen at the White House on the night Nixon resigned, and Carter told me he would not have voted to impeach Nixon even after the June 23 tape implicating Nixon in an obstruction of justice. It was a place, the locals pronounced, which had been most helped by Nixon's revenue-sharing legislation, having made possible a professional police force and this beautiful recreation complex. They were honoring Nixon for the "positive things he had done," like ending the Vietnam War and stopping the draft. All seemed to accept the standard argument that "Nixon did no worse than anyone else. He just got caught," and they even extended this, under the guidance of Judge Muncy, with the thought that the Watergate burglars were really looking for evidence of Castro money in the McGovern campaign. Leslie County, they said with one voice, was one hundred years ahead of its time.

But as often as I would hear these statements in Hyden, I would hear the theme of survival. "I've got to live here." "I've got too much property I can't get rid of, if I should have to move." "Don't do me in, now." Or, as a social studies teacher said, "To feel really comfortable as a teacher in this county, it'd be well to have fifty votes in your family. You young people think we should continue to chew ourselves up inside, and I used to be that way, too. But the older I get, the more I keep my ideas to myself.

I just listen to other people, and draw my own conclusions. I learn more that way. Survival is the name of the game here." History, he went on, is like the Bible. "It's a matter of opinion."

But young Judge Muncy had another, more personal reason for wanting to control the comments of his citizens firmly. He was under Federal investigation for vote fraud. The judge was lucky that the news of the probe did not make a national news wire until the day before Nixon arrived, and by that time the national press was focusing on "the return of Richard Nixon to public life." I heard about the wire story from a resident who had been talking to me in hushed tones from the beginning, as he pumped my gas.

"Did you hear that the investigation made the World News?" he asked. "They say we're having another Watergate here."

An hour later I watched Muncy deny to White House correspondent Helen Thomas, of the Associated Press, that he was under any investigation "that I know of." ^{*But his "deniability" was not good.*} ~~^~~ The day after Nixon had flown away, he told me that he had a tape of his interrogation by James Parrott, the United States Postal Inspector from Dayton, and with a sigh of relief, said, "I'm just glad that this investigation did not mar the visit of President Nixon in any way."

Muncy's problem arose from the 1977 primary and general election, in which he defeated George Wooten again in the former, and an independent in the latter.

Local elections in Eastern Kentucky get down to the basics. They have historically been as corrupt as any in the nation. In answer to reporters' questions about Watergate, Muncy would often say that he knew what went on inside politics, and what Nixon (and implicitly he) did was no different from the general practice all over the country. If that is true, if Leslie County politics is a microcosm of the nation, then we've really got problems.

Electioneering irregularities in Eastern Kentucky, Harry Caudill told me, are "as common as milkweed," "as endemic as breathing."

"Occasionally," he said, "the federals get a little indignant and send someone to the penitentiary. But if we sent everyone guilty of election fraud to jail, we'd have a very low population."

Before voting machines were instituted here in 1963, the classic vote fraud up the hollows was the chain ballot. The first man in the line would take his ballot into the closed booth, stuff it in his shirt, and emerge to put an old piece of newspaper in the ballot box. Then he would go outside, and behind a rock hand over the ballot to the boss and receive his pint of whiskey in return. The boss would then mark the ballot, hand it to the second man, who would deposit the marked ballot in the box and return with an empty . . . and on down the line. Another technique was for the crooked election official to place the ballot box in the trunk of his car at the close of the day, and deliver another box to the courthouse for counting. Some years ago, in Breathitt County, known then as "bloody Breathitt," an honest official tried to frustrate this technique by shooting a hole in the legal ballot box at the end of the voting day, so he could be sure the proper box arrived at the counting tables. But he made a misjudgment, because his action triggered a shootout, and he was killed. Killings and shootings at polling places are not unheard of, even today, and guns are always present.

Since the appearance of the voting machine, candidates in Leslie County have had to compete for votes with dollars. The standard price for a vote is \$25, but in a close and bitter contest like the Wooten-Muncy primary race in May 1977, the price went as high as \$100, and even higher if the seller was a patriarch at the head of a hollow who controlled a score of family votes.

Much of this corruption is made possible by the fact that in Leslie County, as many as one voter in three needs assistance from a polling official to cast his vote. Not uncommonly, a polling "judge" can be seen behind a voting machine, keeping tabs on how the vote is going for his candidate.

In the 1977 primary, George Wooten was not inclined to underestimate Allen Muncy. "My opponents call me a crook, and I call them a crook. That's just the way it is," Muncy said, but that seemed to underplay the nature of political rhetoric here. There are two newspapers in the county. The Wooten paper is the Leslie County News, run by a one-armed, temperamental publisher named Vernon Baker. In the '77 primary, Muncy ran as much against Baker as Wooten. Rumors were circulated that Baker was a drug-pusher as well as a liar, and the judge filed a \$1 million libel suit against the Leslie County News for an advertisement that appeared in support of Wooten, even though it was signed and paid for.

Here's an extract from another ad run in the News, supporting Wooten:

"C. Allen Muncy is a liar and a demagogue who has been trained by professional law to lie and has turned his training into the dictatorial European tactics from which we escaped by a war of revolution 200 years ago. This young Hitlerian demagogue has brought back, here to Leslie County, the very worst of European philosophies and has turned it upon his own relatives and people. . . . Mr. Muncy has misrepresented himself within the church and upon the street by looking down his little short nose at the needy of our county; he is a respecter of the rich and powerful. So was Adolph Hitler and the Tsars of Russia. Ivan the Terrible was a princeling compared to this would-be dictator here."

The Thousandsticks News is the Muncy paper. Owned by Paul Hensley, who doubles as the spokesman for the Hazard Coal Operators Association, this weekly

claims the larger circulation, and therefore by law is entitled to all the legal advertising from the county courthouse, a considerable economic factor for the survival of a rural newspaper. But 2,500 of Hensley's 6,000 subscribers are from out of the county, mainly coal operators in Hazard, who, Hensley says, buy his paper for their miners because his paper is "pro-coal."

In the 1973 election the practice of "speaking" began, and in large measure Muncy attributes his victory then to the fact that George Wooten had finally met his match. Before, Wooten could simply outtalk anyone in the county.

"Before I came along," Muncy said, "his opponent would get up, say 'Ladies and gentlemen, I'm running for judge. I'd like for you to help me, and I'll do the best I can.' He would sit down, and then George'd get up and tear him apart."

The speaking up the creeks in May 1977 were hot affairs. Now, when Wooten no longer threatens Muncy's power, the young judge said about the old, "George did a lot of good, with what he had to do with. He done about as good as anyone could have, except in law enforcement." But at a speaking up Rockhouse Creek in May 1977, Muncy took the back of the pickup truck first, before a crowd of five hundred, with a different tone.

"George Wooten was the sheriff of this county for four years and county judge for twelve," Muncy began. "You know what kind of sheriff he made. Every bootlegger in the county was paying him for protection. Those who weren't paying him, he caught. You in the coal business, you miners and operators, you union organizers and independents, know he sold to both sides, and sold out both sides. That's the kind of man George Wooten is. He tried to suit every crowd: young and old, the lawless and those who believe in the law, the church-going people and the outlaws too."

"Why, down here the other day, to a crowd of 1,500, he made one of the most amazing statements I've ever heard. I've got it here on tape, with his own voice, so he can't deny it. He said, 'I don't know how many outlaws or how many thugs or how many dope peddlers there are in this crowd that's my friends. But I'll tell you one thing. I appreciate all of ye. I like ye. I'm one of ye.' I guess for once in his life, George Wooten told the truth. Ladies and gentlemen, I can't believe that a man who wants to be your county judge, who would decide what happens to your money, would make a statement like that"

(At a different point in the campaign, Muncy would be quoted in The Thousandsticks News as saying all Wooten supporters were crooks and thugs, as well as liars.)

Muncy's speech went on for over an hour, citing one personal or political evil that Wooten had supposedly committed since birth. Wooten then took the microphone, holding a cup of 7-Up and saying he wished it was "mountain tea."

"Ladies and gentlemen, the judge here has told everything on me from the day I was born. If you believed everything you've heard, I'd a been in the penitentiary for life, years ago. Well, judge, I'm not going to tell all I've heard about you, judge. It'd embarrass me. Be a waste of time anyway. But you folks know what kind of a judge he's been. He's been harder to find than Howard Hughes.

"In fact, Allen reminds me of this old fella up here I used to know. He'd been sparkin' this sweetheart in Leslie County, and people thought she was really gettin' interested in him. She thought she really knew him, and thought she might even marry him. Well, you know what? He took sick, and about two weeks later, I took her over to the hospital to see him.

"Well, they'd pitched the ole boy a nightgown that was a little too short, and it hid up, kinda like this. [Wooten raised his hands from his knees to his waist.] Well, here he comes, awalkin' down the hall, a-staggerin' down the hall towards us. And she kept eyein' him over, kept lookin' at him a little closer. We'd walk up a little closer. She'd look at him a little closer. She got up right to him, and she hunched me a little, and said:

"'Look-a-thar, George. You know he told me he had everything I needed, said he had plenty a money, owned a big farm down the Blue Grass, had a big bank account, but just look a-yonder. I was fixin' to make the worst mis-take I've made in my life.'

"And that's what a lot of you people would say right now. Three-and-a-half years ago, you made a bad mistake when you elected him judge."

Wooten, too, went on for nearly an hour, halting only when a huge coal truck rumbled by. Each time one of the monsters would pass without a cover over the load Wooten would shout, "Where's your tar-po-lin?" Muncy's law supposedly required all truckers to cover their loads, so the cargo would not spill onto the road, but they rarely complied. Twenty minutes into Wooten's rebuttal, Muncy shouted out from the back of the audience that Wooten had a gun on him. Wooten denied it, and slowly took his coat off to prove it. "But I've got a good five of clubs here," he said, trying to defuse a tense moment.

"I've got a lot of friends on these grounds," he warned. "Nobody here's big enough to scare me. Nobody's here I'm afraid of. Nobody."

But by this time Judge Muncy had learned to use the powers of incumbency, and he had been lucky. On April 4, 1977, a flood swept the Kentucky River, and in the devastation Leslie County was one of fifteen counties declared a

national disaster area (although the damage in Leslie was far lighter than the other counties). Federal disaster relief in the amount of \$172,000 flowed into the office of the county judge, and Judge Muncy, violating no federal laws, applied the disaster money to the recreation center. "There's nothing that says a judge can't build a monument to himself with this money if he wants to," one expert said. Suddenly, from other county funds, gravel for washed-out roads and steel to replace footlogs along the creeks began to appear in the hollows, and it was said that you could always tell a Muncy supporter by the gravel in front of his house. Seeing a good thing, Muncy announced that the county would take out a loan at the Pineville Bank for \$36,000 to pay contractors who had rebuilt bridges and cleaned up debris after the biggest disaster in recent times, the 1963 flood. After that flood, with George Wooten as Judge, the county received seventy-five percent of disaster relief money it requested, and here Muncy was promising to make up the other twenty-five percent fifteen years later, just before the primary. Once the money came from Pineville--Muncy got only half his request from the bank, \$18,000--he divided it up among those contractors who were friendly to him, or could be made so by the offer, but denied a share to hard-core Wooten supporters. "But it was a good vote getter," Wooten said with a wink. "Probably got him three hundred votes."

As the May primary date approached, a new electioneering trick commanded the attention of political strategists: the absentee ballot. The Kentucky Legislature had liberalized the procedure for voting absentee by authorizing an application which stated simply that the voter "expects to be absent from the county on election day." The requirement that the application be notarized was dropped. Suddenly, organizers were up and down the hollows with fistfuls of applications, and the clerk of court began receiving applications, sometimes

as many as fifteen or twenty, to be mailed to one post-office box. Under the law, the clerk was required to mail the official ballot to the address on the application, regardless of how many were mailed to one place.

One Muncy organizer who had used four different box numbers to receive purchased ballots described the process to me this way.

"We felt that if you got a ballot in advance, that was a bird in hand, and there was no worry that on election day, the vote might be bought over your head. Nobody could take that vote away from you. So I'd canvass the hollows for absentee voters. You'd have to deceive 'em, of course, say, I'll get the ballot for you, and then on election day, you won't have to bother going down to the polls. So he'd sign the application, I'd put one of my box numbers on it, and he'd never even see the ballot."

And a person who had sold his vote, as well as that of his wife and son, for \$100 to a Muncy worker told me of the approach two days before the election. He was taken to the U.S. Post Office where mail was demanded from a certain mail box. On this occasion, the Hyden postmaster refused to surrender mail from the box, and so the man was taken out into the country to the house of another Muncy organizer. There he signed three ballots, and a \$100 bill was laid on his lap.

When the results of the primary were counted, Muncy beat Wooten by 121 votes out of 5,289 ballots. Three hundred forty-five absentee votes were cast for Muncy; 335 for Wooten. But in the general election in November '77, when Muncy faced a "hogback" challenge from an independent candidate, Muncy received 1,073 absentee votes out of 3,946 cast for him. All told, in the November election, twenty-six percent of Leslie Countians voted absentee after a fashion, compared to a one percent absentee vote in Jefferson County, the site of Louisville, which had also voted for a county judge on the same day. This past May, in the Republican primary for the congressional nomination, with no local

racers at stake, only 1,236 votes were cast in Leslie County, three of which were absentee. The reason for the low vote in the congressional primary this May, according to Judge Muncy, is that Federal postal inspectors arrived in the county immediately before the election, and "scared everybody so bad."

The U.S. postal inspectors came from the district headquarters in Dayton, Ohio, under the direction of Inspector James Parrott. He in turn was working with the United States Attorney in Lexington, Pat Malloy. All applications for absentee ballots and the votes themselves were subpoenaed by Malloy and taken to Lexington for safekeeping. Since the 1977 elections were local, only the misuse of the United States mail came under federal jurisdiction. All other election violations were the responsibility of Muncy's ex-law partner and now county attorney, McKimley Morgan. Muncy felt that Leslie County was being singled out in Eastern Kentucky, where other counties had a higher number of absentee ballots cast (though none had a higher percentage than twenty-six percent), and he found a mountain explanation for Inspector Parrott's behavior. Parrott, Muncy claimed, had a distant relative in Leslie County who was a political rival.

Philosophically, Judge Muncy embraces the view that politics is dirty on all levels, and anyone who says otherwise is a hypocrite.

"Politicians are politicians everywhere, whether it's way down here on the little level, or way up there on the big level. You try to win using the political moves you can pull. . . . It's just like everywhere else. It's just like the way Congress does, and presidents do.

"They stole the election in Illinois from President Nixon in 1960. It's obvious that the unions stole the election in Ohio from President Ford in the last election. To say that elections in Leslie County are dishonest . . . why, they're no more dishonest, or no more honest, than anywhere. You've got to win first, before you can do anything. I think John F. Kennedy said that."

No wonder Judge Muncy and Leslie Countians generally found the fuss over Watergate or abuse of power so confusing.

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The recreation center had been the most popular plank in Judge Muncy's platform for the May 1977 election, and he made sure that the groundbreaking for the complex took place right before the primary. As a history major in college, he wanted the facility to be named for someone "great." In the early discussions, George Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt were all considered. The facility, the judge announced to the voters, would probably be named for Gerald Ford.

After Muncy's reelection in November and after the arrival of the federal investigators in the county, the Leslie County Centennial Commission, which Muncy chaired, met to make a final decision on naming the center. The discussion this time turned to the question "Who helped us the most?"

"Once that question was asked, the answer was clear," Muncy said. "Nixon's revenue sharing had made the center possible." Simultaneously, the Commission decided to name another building in the recreation complex after Gerald Ford. But this idea was dropped when Ford did not even acknowledge the communication from Leslie County.

Actually, the \$2.6 million budget for the facility contained less than \$135,000 of federal revenue-sharing money. The 1973 severance tax legislation, passed by the Kentucky Legislature, had really made the center possible. Severance tax is a levy against the coal operators for coal extracted from a certain county, the revenue from which is returned to that same area for community development. The legislation passed over the strong objections of Eastern Kentucky legislators, who were representing the coal interests, in what became known as the "mountain revolt," and it was pushed by Democratic Governor Wendell Ford.

Paul Hensley, the publisher of The Thousandsticks News and the flack for the Hazard Coal Operators, was also the "token Democrat" on the Centennial Commission. He said, "I thought that if we named the facility for Nixon, and he were invited, he would come. It was time for him to come out of seclusion."

But it is also possible that Judge Muncy was playing a very bold game. His admiration for Nixon politics and accomplishments notwithstanding, bringing Richard Nixon to Leslie County would make Muncy well known not only in his state but in the nation, and he would thereby be a formidable figure for any prosecutor to take on for a piddling little matter of vote-fraud in a local election.

The recreation facility itself is a fine-looking brown brick structure, with a sweeping angular roof line that knifes its lines dramatically across the green hills beyond. The site was carved from a hillside that plunged to the Middle Ford of the Kentucky River below, and the contractor--needless to say, a friend of Judge Muncy's--was paid \$2,700 a day for the excavation, and also removed a fine seam of coal beforehand, gravy off the top. The structure was built on land fill above the middle fork, and it did not seem to bother local officials that the roof line of the building was nine feet below the crest of the 1963 flood. If the effect of Nixon's visit to Hyden is transitory, it is possible that his gymnasium is as well.

In the days before the ex-president arrived, the activity around the gym was furious. So many things, mountain style, had been left to the last moment. There was a movie-set quality to the preparations. River sand was filled in and sloped up along the sides of the building, and swatches of turf rolled out on top. No doubt the turf would be brown and dying in a few weeks, but it looked fine the day Nixon came. Camp Creek Road, which passes in front of the

facility after you cross a newly painted bridge, was paved in front of the complex two days before the dedication, but the paving stopped around the bend several hundred yards, where the facility disappeared from view.

Downtown, chrysanthemums replaced weeds in front of the family-owned telephone company (serving 4,000 customers), and the four pay phones in town were spruced up. The joke went around that when Nixon came, locals would stand eight-hour shifts in the phone booths, so the reporters could not reach their papers with snooty stories. Signs, painted by students under watchful eyes, began to appear on the highway and on store fronts: "Still the People's Mandate," "The Grass Roots Like Nixon," "Nixon to the Thousandst" but the best, a banner stretching across Main Street reading "Hyden Writing History as It Will Be in 2078," blew down before Nixon could pass under it. A New York Times photographer complained to me that the signs were visually disappointing--no spontaneity. In Keen's Variety Store, the enterprising young buyer, Kenneth Keen, had bought one thousand plates with Dick and Pat on them from a souvenir dealer in Harrodsburg, Kentucky, and he commissioned some fine-smelling cedar paperweights with a grotesque picture of the wax figure of Nixon from the Wax Museum at Cave City, Kentucky, laminated on. "It was the best I could do on two weeks' notice," the young buyer said. He'd even gotten several hundred coal statuettes out of West Virginia, carved in the form of a miner, passing off the ones with puffy cheeks as Nixon. In the end, the plates didn't move too well, and Keen was stuck with two hundred of them. On Thursday, before the big Saturday, a hawker from Lexington appeared on Main Street, laboring valiantly in a 96-degree heat to sell 3-D buttons of Nixon-Agnew for \$2.50. He had saved the buttons from the 1972 campaign--like Confederate money. For him Hyden was no gold mine either, and he was gone the next day. And finally,

a vendor near the hardware store sold pressure-cooked beans about which everyone complained--"not like beans cooked slowly all day with pork fat"--and miniature oxen yokes handcrafted by the only black man in Leslie County. "But he's only half-black," the vendor said by way of reassurance. Meanwhile, at the Appalachia Motel, a mile out of town on Rockhouse Creek, Judge Muncy had ordered a bed of his own put in the room where Nixon would sleep. Yellow roses began to overwhelm the suite, and someone asked if a check had been made to see if Nixon had any allergies.

When they both hit the street on Thursday, the Leslie County News outdid The Thousandsticks News, with a red-white-and-blue front page dominated by a blue picture of Nixon, bordered by red stars, and an American flag, eye-level, on each side of the picture. The day before publication, Vernon Baker, the publisher of the unsanctioned paper, smiled about the \$250 extra he'd paid for his front page.

"Here we're honoring a man who was driven from office for being an outright crook," Baker said, nudging me. "Oh, you're going to get a big laugh out of my front page."

Muncy's office was an anthill of energy, with high school girls typing the names of those smiled upon with invitations to the dedication. Judge Muncy had screened the invitees meticulously and, naturally, George Wooten, although he was a loyal Nixon supporter and had met Nixon at the 1969 Inaugural Ball as a representative of Leslie County, was not invited, nor were many of his supporters.

Muncy, meanwhile, held court for the endless stream of reporters. Hundreds of supporting letters, which had flooded his office, cluttered his desk. More than a half-dozen times I heard him tell a reporter: "We're supposed to believe in forgiveness. The Bible says, 'All men have sinned

and come short of glory.'" More than four hundred reporters had requested credentials for the event, and Muncy, to his credit, had been tightfisted with dispensing the coveted white entry card. He wanted the hall filled with Leslie Countians, if he could manage it, but when the Nixon people heard that some press--some from as far away as Melbourne, Australia--were having trouble getting c redentials, they told Muncy to loosen up.

From the letters on the Judge's desk it was clear that the invitation to Nixon had touched many. Enthusiastic endorsements came with passionate exclamation points. Even poems of congratulations were sent. One entitled "Watergate" came from a Herman Scott in St. Louis, and read:

What a Sideshow, what a Circus, what a Smokescreen it has been!
 What depths of degradation men will stoop to just to win!
 And, the Newsmen, opportunists, magnified each juicy bit,---
 Each one tried to outdo the other and to dig a deeper pit.

Now the Smoking Guns are cooling and some saner minds prevail;
 The barking of the Bloodhounds no longer do assail;
 Those who cried, "Destroy Him," are standing there aghast
 As they see their own undoing in the Die that they have cast.

Once again we see enacted, on the Stage of Human Life,
 Our Leader sit dejected, as they seek His Very Life,---
 But, another Day is coming,--and a Clearer Brighter Day,
 When History will vindicate the Man they Tried to Slay.

As Nixon's arrival approached, thoughtful people in Hyden quietly expressed two concerns. One was philosophic. Disagreement with the invitation was being made out to be unChristian, unAmerican, and disloyal to Leslie County. The second was practical. Muncy had deputized twenty-six of his road workers, most of whom had only operated "a hoe and chopping ax before," as George Wooten put it. They had donned uniforms and had .38s strapped on their belts. One of those deputized had just been released from the penitentiary after a four-year sentence for armed robbery. The event was going to attract crazies, the fearful said, and there were too many people around with

guns who knew nothing to do but shoot. What if there was an incident?

One whispered, "How will we ever follow this? "A Benedict Arnold Ping-Pong Tournament, perhaps?"

Above Campbell's Drug Store, the county attorney, McKinnley Morgan, was high on everyone's list to interview, as the most important elected Democrat in the county. A swashbuckler in appearance, with a heavy mustache, hair styled and parted in the middle, and a round, boisterous laugh, Morgan played the role of official dissenter well. He was "tickled" when Nixon resigned, and thought the failure to jail him along with the rest was "a failure of the judicial system." He thought the gymnasium should have been called "Tricky Dick Arena," and he was anxious to please with moonshine stories which are "part of our heritage." He planned a quiet dissenters' party on Saturday night and intended to go fishing during the dedication and "drink some ginger ale." But he was proud that the young had taken over the county, and "if it takes Richard Nixon coming to display it, fine."

"The only thing that makes this visit tolerable," Morgan said, "is that it changes our image. We used to have the bad image before . . . 'before the affluence' I call it . . . of violence and of people living in despair. That image will be erased now. We still aren't blue grass, but we ain't hick either.

* * * * *

The sleek white Lear jet, owned by a Hazard coal operator, darted out of the smoky sky above the London, Kentucky, airport precisely on time. As Nixon emerged from the beautiful machine into the blistering heat of the Kentucky afternoon, looking slightly pastier than I remembered him during the six weeks of the David Frost tapings last year, the four brass members of the Laurel County High School band struck up "Hail to the Chief" more or less on

key. The tune sounded thin and tinny in the haze. The group needed a tuba. The crowd of 500 faithful cheered and waved their printed signs reading "Nixon in 1980." The man with the barber-shop hat bolstered with "Nixon-Agnew" was nearly trampled by all the television cameramen trying to film him. The ex-President took the speaking stand and gracefully hit the right chords: Kentucky hospitality, horses, basketball, Pat, moonshine, ending the war, and bringing the POWs home. He tarried for an inordinately long time working the tiny crowd and signing copies of his memoirs, and many would remark later on how much he seemed to be enjoying himself. Then he climbed into the limousine for the forty-five ride along the Daniel Boone Parkway.

I arrived at the Leslie County line some minutes before his motorcade. There, parked along both sides of the road, were several hundred vehicles, mainly pickup trucks. Above, helicopters circled with the television crews, and on the ground interviewers dotted the crowd. As a media event, there was genius in the choice of Hyden for Nixon's first formal appearance since resignation. There on the parkway, with a great scarp of limestone and shale, threaded with bands of coal as a backdrop, granite-faced, retired miners beamed with pride and excitement over what was about to happen. How much more interesting, more graphic, it all was than if Nixon had chosen the El Toro Retired Pilots Association! That these poor and victimized people were celebrating the man who had systematically dismantled the social programs of his predecessors made the event all the more confusing and all the more intriguing for the television audience. (In fact, none of Nixon's cutbacks in poverty programs, except, perhaps, the Happy Pappies, had affected Eastern Kentucky.) But this talent for mixing horror and fascination is Nixon's special gift, and by coming here he achieved exposure on national television for four days instead of one.

The plan for the evening called for a private reception at the

Appalachia Motel. As Nixon settled in to prepare for it, some mountaineer, high in the hill above the motel, began his own private twenty-one-gun salute with sticks of dynamite. Several sticks detonated, one right after another. Then a pause of a minute or so. BOOM. BOOM. Silence for four minutes. Then another. One had the vision of a wild-eyed highlander running frantically from plunger to plunger, or taking flying leaps behind rocks or into ditches. The secret service evidently knew the salute was coming, so there was no gallant charge up the mountain by the peace forces.

Leslie Countians in groups of twenty were bused up to the motel to meet their hero. No liquor was served at the reception. Leslie County is dry, Judge Muncy a teetotaler, although in the 1977 primary the shocking rumor spread that Muncy owned a Whiskey, Wine, and Gin store in Perry County, next door, but this was denied with a show of records and indignation.

The following morning, Nixon slept late as Leslie County went to church. At the Presbyterian Church, Reverend Leonard Hood chose not to repeat his sermon of the week before. Then, he had noted that Richard Nixon was a Quaker, and that George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, was the first not to doff his hat to the king. Brotherhood did not mean that everyone should think alike, the Reverend Hood preached. Adulation belongs to God, and God alone. Those who were against Nixon should pray for his soul, for the Reverend was sure that those who were for him would not do so.

But up on Hurt's Creek, Vance Bowling, the elected minister of the Church of Christ, struck a different theme. Man is not capable of judging, he said, for he can not know all the facts, nor know the heart. Judgment belongs to God alone. Consider Matthew, "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." Later, in the dedication ceremonies, it

was Mr. Bowling, who was favored by Judge Muncy, who gave the invocation. For his Scriptural reading he chose from Psalms 24 and 25, and once again seemed to provide heavenly certification for the visit and divine insulation for Leslie County against those who would make fun of her.

"Who shall ascend into the holy hill of the Lord? / And who shall stand in his holy place?," the minister read in a raw voice.

"Let me not be ashamed. Let not mine enemies triumph over me."

"Let none that wait on thee be ashamed; let them be ashamed who transgress without cause."

"Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions"

"For thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity, for it is great."

And then the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debtors, as we forgive our debts"

At the motel, the secret servicemen readied the motorcade. The absence, rather than presence, of dignitaries was noteworthy. No state-wide official was there, although there were two former governors, Louie B. Nunn, 1968-1972, and the irrepressible A. B. "Happy" Chandler, ex-Governor, Senator, and Baseball Commissioner. As a child, I had attended the 1956 Democratic Convention with my parents, and, to Chandler's great delight, I told him of the campaign buttons I still had of his curious favorite-son candidacy. Chandler, who will be 80 on his next birthday, complained that he was spending his time going around the country burying his friends, nowadays, and "I can't replace 'em anymore," but that unhappy thought was only a blip on the graph of steady, up-beat talk.

"You know, Scotty," he said, "we polled 352,000 for this man in 1972, a pretty good vote in the State of Kentucky. What happened to him was an outrage--ought to have been tried in Police Court on Monday morning. He

was driven from office for no good reason. Why, what we've started here might just sweep the country like Proposition 13."

I bade the elder statesman goodbye, and after taking a long look at the exquisite 1957 Cadillac convertible which had been the follow-up car for the secret service behind Kennedy's car at Dallas and in which Nixon would ride triumphantly through Hyden, I hurried downtown. The crowd was sparse. Fewer people waited patiently on Main Street, I guessed, than had requested press credentials. Nylon rope stretched along the edges of the downtown angular parking spaces, about ten yards from the curb, but only down by the courthouse, where the road makes a right turn at Campbell's Drug Store, was the throng more than one deep. When the motorcade reached Campbell's, I thought for a moment that Nixon was going to stop the car and, old style, wade into the crowd. But he must have thought better of it when he saw that there was no crowd whatever after Campbell's, and the car sped on to the recreation center on the Harlan Road.

The audience of 3,500 had been cooped up in the un-airconditioned auditorium for over an hour in oven temperatures, but they were game and excited, and there ~~was a case~~ was but one case of heat prostration. A slew of Eastern Kentucky county judges were introduced after the invocation and, finally, Judge Muncy gave them "the man I consider to be the greatest President of this century."

Nixon showed them right off that his timing was still good. He thanked them for a very "warm reception," as he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and flashed his famous smile. The crowd erupted with laughter and clapping. Later, he noted that Kentucky had beaten his alma mater, Duke, in the national basketball championships, and the crowd, this time ungraciously, stamped its approval. Basketball, he conceded, was not his best sport. At Whittier College

he played one year as a substitute, and it wasn't a bad season.

"In fact," he said, "we had a perfect record. (Pause.) We lost every game." (Laughter.)

The speech rambled on for forty minutes over familiar generalities about the spirit of heartland America and the need to protect freedom in the world from the dark forces of Communism. I lounged outside on the sod, listening to the speech under booming loud-speakers which were intended to bring the word to twenty thousand, but reached only about one thousand. Among them, I could find only one benign crazy and a few Moonies. I sat next to East Kentucky poet James Still, who had come over from his home on Wolfpen Creek in Knott County to watch the carnival. Still found it difficult to arouse any emotion for Nixon, positive or negative, and in that, I judged, he reflected the general American attitude. Richard Nixon had lost his power to engage the country emotionally on any level, certainly not with love or hate any more. Still and I sympathized with the reporters who had come to cover the speech, for there was precious little to hang onto. When it was over, Still remarked, "I defy you to find one person in this crowd who can repeat one sentence that Nixon uttered. Well . . . maybe somebody will remember the last."

The last sentence was "God bless you, and God bless America."

The following day, the Nixon visit "history," I made my way to Judge Muncy's office through a truly thick crowd on the main street of Hyden. It was July 3, Monday, the first business day of the new month, when food stamps are distributed at the post office. The young judge looked rested, and his expression was mellow. Everything had gone beautifully. Nixon had told him that this was the nicest reception he'd ever gotten . . . in any small place.

"It showed the people in the rest of the state that we can do things as well here as any place." Before I would dampen the judge's spirit by going over the details of the vote fraud, I asked him about Nixon, the man.

"I felt a sort of greatness when I was around him, like I was close to history," the Judge said. "Despite thirty years of going through what I've gone through for a couple of weeks in a small way, this man is mentally as sharp as any person I've ever met. You know, when he landed at London, I got to ride back with him. He was comfortable, in a good mood. But yesterday on that stage, Nixon was happy. In that speech, he spoke to more than just Leslie County, saying 'thank you for having me.' He spoke to the nation, maybe the world. Maybe even a message to the Russians, too. If it's true, as the press said, that this is his first step back into active participation in the way ex-Presidents do, I'm proud Leslie County is the place he began."

An hour later, interrupted by a call of thanks from Nixon from the old Western White House, I left him. Up on Camp Creek I found Judge Wooten, stripped to the waist as usual, in his baggy Bermuda shorts and a smudgy, CAT hat, looking over his four different varieties of green gourds with special pride. Come back in thirty days, he said, and trash once again will be spread up and down the main street of Hyden. And then, playing off his standard joke, he said: "You know, it reminds me of that dream I used to have all the time up on Hell for Certain Creek. I'd go to sleep, and I'd dream I was in the Kentucky Blue Grass and had plenty of money. And then I'd wake up and found I was right back there in Hell for Certain."