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The Boykin Legacy at Doublegates Lodge

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and Blood Sport

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Photo by Ric Moore

The Boykin Legacy at Doublegates Lodge

A "South Fork" of Southern largess and bloodsport

by Chris McFadyen

Above the all too modest white-washed double gate entrance off Highway 43, just south of Sunflower, the sign says simply "The Frank W. Boykin Hunting Lodge. Built 1905."

It's not first impression you'd expect for this shrine to Mobile's most famous

editor's note: Mobile Bay Monthly writer Chris McFadyen and photographer Leigh Brown spent one October afternoon touring Doublegates where cooks Lizzie and Dorothy prepared a spread of fried chicken that was sure to please. But even more filling were the stories they heard as told by members of the Boykin clan themselves.

tycoon and Washington fat cat —master of the flamboyant gesture and grand entrance.

The place seems more enchanting than imposing as the trail winds along. A grove of dogwood stippled the forest undergrowth for about 300 yards, delicate as a Chinese screen.

But modesty and enchantment ain't what I'm stalking. It's a Bunyanesque legacy I'm after, a rich storied legacy enjoyed by the great man's kin here at Doublegates—a "South Fork" of Southern largess and blood sport.

More promising is the first beast I spot: a fox squirrel as big and orange as a Pekingese.

This is more like it, I tell myself,

recalling one of those Boykin stories most Mobilians grew up hearing: This one centered on a 250-pound buck, biggest ever slain on the camp lands. During the first of Frank Boykin's lavish hunting parties for Washington big guns (1935), House Clerk South Trimble blasts this patriarch of the herd. Upstart freshman Congressman Boykin immediately orders the deer frozen in leaping stance and delivered to President Roosevelt.

Through the loblollies, long-leaf, and slash pine and into a clearing, expectation rises with an expanse of lawn that rolls on and on like a clause of the Constitution, up a hill to a big three-story, porched-wrapped whitewashed farm house: the lodge.



Photo by Leigh Brown

The Boykin Clan – story tellin'. (Left to Right) Lynn, Starr, Tammy, Riley, Bob, and forest manager Hubert Bolen.

Members of the Cherokee, Isuzu and Cadillac tribes — each sporting personalized tags — are banded at the rear of the lodge. A huge red iron framework with block, tackle and wench, where the deer carcasses are hung and skinned, dominates the front lawn. Above this rig, an iron scroll proclaims the Congressman's favorite piece of ballyhoo: Everything Is Made For Love!

He copped this campaign slogan from a Broadway spoof about a candidate who runs on a platform of "pure-D love." Boykin's reputation for unbounded hospitality, however, was no gag. And continuing that tradition, Boykin scions are on hand to personally show off the place:

Bob Boykin, the Congressman's son, and his wife Lynn. Their daughter, Starr Boykin, and Riley Boykin Smith, grandson of the Congressman, and his wife Tammy.

Bob and Lynn — a retired couple who seem perfectly matched for their now full-time occupation of hunting and fishing every quadrant of the planet — are the first out of the chute with a story. No sooner than we're all sunk deep into the leather of the den, ringed round, rafter-to-baseboard, by a Noah's ark of taxidermy comes a ghost story.

Yes, Frank Boykin bought the place from some Yankees in 1919, after the death of a widow, Agnes Milner, Bob answers. "Story is," says Bob, "after Miss Agnes' husband passed away, she lived here all by herself for several years. When

she died, they laid her out, like they used to, here in the house, up in the attic room — what we call the bull pen. But it was the flood season

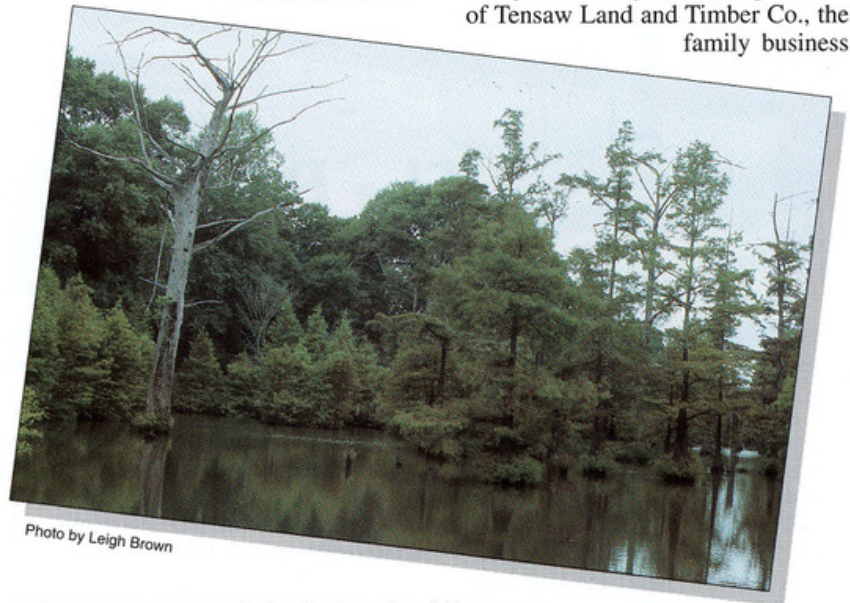


Photo by Leigh Brown

Cedar swamps of Johnson's Creek, where the wild hogs roam.

when she died, and the water came up so high they couldn't get her to the train station to carry her back North. She laid up here two or three weeks before the river went down."

The upshot of this is that Miss Agnes' spirit survived the stench of her shroud. The "bull pen" where Miss Agnes molded — camp bedroom for kids of the ex-

tended Boykin clan — is furnished with 12 iron beds in dormitory rows and Miss Agnes' old rocking chair. Not only does the ethereal Agnes still rock in this chair, they say, all efforts to move the chair downstairs have ended with its being spirited back to the bull pen.

The elk, buck and bison that rear out from the den walls are the only ones who keep a straight face as this story unreels.

"Oh, yes, we've had lots of run-ins with her," says Lynn in all seriousness. "That's why Bob and I won't stay here overnight." She recounts an episode when husband Bob repeatedly tried to turn off the lights over the skinning rack, only to have them flicked back on by an incorporeal hand. "Finally," said Lynn, "I heard Bob downstairs say, 'Well, by dam, if she wants 'em on we'll leave 'em on!'"

Riley adds a third generation account of the night he and his cousin Dickie sneaked down to the den to swipe midnight beers and got, instead, a glimpse of old Agnes. "When we talk about it now as grownups, we can't seem to recall who exactly saw what," he adds.

Riley, in his early 40s, is the president of Tensaw Land and Timber Co., the family business

that owns and manages over 90,000 acres amassed by tycoon Boykin. Riley's father, also Riley Smith, a University of Alabama and professional football star who married the Congressman's daughter Frances, was also president of the company at one time, as was Bob and his twin Jack, in a long line of family succession from that original, avid spark of

enterprise whom they all call "Papa."

Son of a Reconstruction-busted Choctaw County cotton farmer, Frank Boykin early on decided he wasn't cut out for cotton chopping or hauling buckets of pine resin. Trades in hogs and Texas mustangs led to a combination railroad commissary, loan operation, cock fighting pit and livery stable. By age 17, he was trading in crossties and traveled to Washington, D.C., where, with the help of Sen. John Bankhead, he cut his first big deal: He would supply crossties for the Southern Railroad.

The Southern Railroad on its ramble up the western flank of the Mobile-Tensaw-Tombigbee delta cuts across the middle of the 7,000 acres of the Frank Boykin Hunting Camp, the jewel in the Boykin real estate crown.

Raw land was Boykin's main meat. "Bowlegged from toting the money" made in crossties, Boykin bought timberland, financed crops, raised cattle, sold timber, traded minerals, and became the largest pine sap distiller in the country by the time resin reached its historical \$26-a-barrel World War I peak. By age 21, Boykin was a multi-millionaire, had announced his retirement and was about to sail off into the sunset on his newly bought yacht *Carlotta* just days before the 1906 hurricane hit. The storm wrecked his timber and turpentine holdings as well as the yacht.

Another temporary reversal for the Boykin wealth was the Great Depression which found him leasing out the hunting camp as a means of paying taxes on his pineywoods empire.

"Rich Yankees from Chicago and Dayton would come down and pay to be hunters for a few weeks at a time," says Bob Boykin with obvious distaste, though in those same molasses-rich tones that the family says are reminiscent of the Congressman's own everlovin' oratory.

Amongst the memorabilia on top of a big black piano that dominates the parlor like some Congolese potentate draped in a tiger skin sits an old scrapbook once used to promote "The Tombigbee Club." In it, page after page is one ghoulish, grinning industrialist after another clutching a pendant turkey by the claws.

But these overexposed moguls are allowed to impose but briefly.

"Lunch is on," Tammy calls in from the kitchen, where cooks Lizzie and Dorothy have been brewing a great board-in-house aroma. Platters of fried chicken, buttermilk biscuits and cane syrup, green



Photo courtesy of the Boykin family

(Left to Right) Congressman Frank Boykin, Ed Ball, billionaire businessman (owner of the Florida-East Coast Rail Road, St. Joe Paper Co. and much else) and Sen. George Smathers.

limas with hamhock, and tumblers of sweet tea soon crowd a hand-hewn oak dining table the size of two BMWs. Gizards, livers and hearts are passed separately and disappear first. A scowling American buffalo head charges from the chimney.

Newest of the Boykin clan — she married Riley five years ago, they have one child — Tammy is an effusive blonde, but as easygoing as the rest and as quick to dash off on their favorite topic: the hunt. "Few years ago, Starr and I decided it was time we had a hunt of our own, we girls. Invite 15-20 of our best friends, have a ball.... You should see 'em," she laughs, describing the arrival of the entourage, rigged out in "big, flashy, black belts, makeup, earrings" and a bouquet of perfumes guaranteed to spook any deer that have not already bolted from the sheer glitz. In keeping with the theme, this hunt is strictly for doe.

"Tammy and I, though, we're more likely to smell like fried chicken," says Starr. A head shorter than her pal, Starr is also a sly kidder, first to start swapping family joshes. She's what *Redbook* used to call a "pert blond." Pert like a pistol. "There is only one of us who has a normal name," she says of her brothers and sisters, explaining that she was not, however, named for Alabama, Green Bay Packer quarterback Bart. "It had some-

thing to do with them being out on Mobile Bay together on a starry night."

All of the Boykin women represented this day seem to have the same blood sport avidity as their counterparts. Lynn, Bob notes, traveled and did very well on the professional bass fishing circuit at one time. Tammy met Riley when she was selling tickets at a Ducks Unlimited fundraiser (though the five suitcases she brought on her first weekend at the lodge became an instant howler). Starr's outdoor equipment includes a kennel of 10 hunting dogs — Boykin Spaniels.

After lunch a tour of the camp grounds in one of the stable of four-wheel vehicles begins with a sidetrip to Bob and Lynn's new cabin they just built, on a bass-and-bream stocked pond about a half-mile from the lodge and Miss Agnes. "We stay here during hunting season when we're not traveling," says Bob, whose summer residence, like most of the family, is on the Gulf, hard by the salt water fishing. The two-story cabin is not large, but its blonde woods are crafted as trig as a 14-meter racing yacht. Full body taxidermy and native handicrafts are the dominate decor, including a New Mexico coyote on the staircase landing and at the foot of Lynn's favorite perch in the den, a frightful jackal. A recent gift from the children, a 64-inch wide screen TV, says Lynn, occasions plans now being drawn

for an addition that'll turn den into great room.

The visit at the cabin is just long enough for Riley and Starr to check out the adjacent stable of three-wheel vehicles and for Tammy to land a bull bream on the landing out from the deck. Target practice out over the pond is foregone for the trip to the hunting heartland, the river.

The camp land extends across Highway 43 to Three Rivers Lake, an oxbow lake fed by the Tombigbee River. The trails cross the Southern Railroad tracks then Johnson's Creek — a meander off Three Rivers Lake that pools into brackish cypress ponds, prime for fishing, bird watching and alligators.

A rough-hewn camp house overlooks the lake about a half-mile from the Tombigbee. This spot offers a grand vista of a fork in the lake, of Ginhouse Island and the Ketchum Place, a peninsula so bountiful with deer and hogs that hunting parties often ferry over from the camp house.

Down among the hardwood river

*By no means
excluded from
these hunts are
the inhabitants of
the bull pen
upstairs. Boykin
kids, it seems,
begin hunting
almost before they
teethe.*

swamps, acorns as big a golfballs pebble the ground — a perfect mast for wild hogs, ugly tusked beasts that can provide some woolly sport, says Starr. She launches an anecdote about a guide of legendary stature nicknamed Long Tom, and then turns the tale over to cousin Riley. Long Tom's efforts to assist a hunter end up with Long Tom desperately latched to a wounded boarhog's tail, doing a dervish dance to keep the pig's business end from catching up.

Deer and turkey, however, are the primary game. Turkey hunters tramp out at daybreak when the birds fly down from their roosts to feed. Deer hunts

begin at the crack of dawn and last most of the day, with two or three runs a day. You either hunt deer by running dogs and drivers at them, chasing them past a gauntlet of shotguns. Or, you shoot from a deer stand located near a field where the deer come to graze. Some of these fields in October are just being broken and planted with wheat and oats for winter feed.



(Left to Right) Congressman Frank Boykin, Homer Gunther, assistant to President Eisenhower, Governor Jim Folsom, and Chairman of House Armed Services Committee Carl Vinson. A political hunt in 1954.

Greenfield feeding begins in earnest in mid-to-late December. Stands of corn dried on the stalk are just now beginning to be fed upon, a few swaths laid over.

Eight years of a state-sponsored wildlife management program has helped trim the herd, but it is "still overpopulated," says Riley. "You have to really stay on top of your management program." The deer population really balloons when the Tombigbee floods, driving deer from the Bull Pen Hunting Camp and other surrounding hunting land. He estimates an average harvest of 150 doe and 40 bucks a year in recent years. The essence of the new management program, says Riley, is to "minimize the buck kill and maximize the doe kill until the population is stabilized."

Turkey season comes in March and lasts through April. A fall turkey season was done away with in Washington County in recent years. Still, the annual take of turkey here at Doublegates runs anywhere from 30-50 birds. Unusually heavy rains in recent years took a heavy toll on fledglings, which have zero tolerance for wet. "Last spring was the first young turkeys I've seen in three years," says Riley. The Cherokee flushes several clutches of these out of the green fields. They're almost as large as the adults, bellies ballasted with wheat and oats,

wings flared like big Japanese fans in their slow-motion lurch for the lowest loblolly branches.

There are several family hunts a year, Thanksgiving being the biggest, drawing kinfolk from across the state. "When they all come in, it's a chance for everyone to renew the extended family," says Riley as we return to the lodge. "It's the glue that holds us together."

By no means excluded from these hunts are the inhabitants of the bull pen upstairs, he says as we settle back into the lodge den. Boykin kids, it seems, begin hunting almost before they teethe.

"I was seven years old, sitting on Papa's knee when I shot my first deer," said Riley, "shaking so hard I could hardly stand it." He says by age 10 most of the

These political hunts usually lasted several days, included lavish lashings of food (largely game, barbecued) and drink (largely bourbon, straight), and rarely rose to the higher ideals of the sporting life.

children, boys and girls, have killed their first deer and been ritually bloodied. Lynn tells about her five-year-old grandson out in the dove field with a BB gun last weekend. Bob recounts a story about his daughter Starr who called up and shot her first turkey at age eight.

Inevitably, though, this talk of the generations turns back to the patriarch, the pineywoods doge whose photos with his political cronies crowd the wall in between trophies.

"The hunting camp was principally used by my father for political purposes," says Bob. "When you're trying to keep a military base like Brookley Field and you're competing for funding with the likes of Bob Sikes, who's looking out for the base in Pensacola, it helps to lobby the fellows on key committees like Armed Services, people like Chairman Carl

Vinson and Mendel Rivers."

Boykin frequently gave the Pentagon brass the run of the place. They would fly in congressmen to Brookley and pack them off to the hunting camp for three or four days of bird or buck blasting and legislative-military bonding. Nate Twinning, the first chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was a regular at the camp. Douglas MacArthur is another trophy on the wall. Lynn Boykin's father, General Dent, was military head of Brookley.

Bob, a retired Air Force officer who flew a P-61 in World War II, remembers the brass especially relished the Boykin retreats because it meant they could finally evade the barrage of petitions from pesky-persistent House Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson. "He'd finally track them down and they'd come up from the gatehouse with a message from Lyndon for one or more of the generals, and they would just ignore it," said Bob.

You'd as soon count the feathers on a turkey as list the political Nimrods who tramped the Boykin woods. Several House Speakers are included in the camp gallery, including, lion of them all, Sam Rayburn. Even the tweedy Brahmins such as Averill Harriman made the pilgrimage.

These political hunts usually lasted several days, included lavish lashings of food (largely game, barbecued) and drink (largely bourbon, straight), and rarely rose to the higher ideals of the sporting life. One legend has Congressman Boykin instructing his employees to tie turkeys to stakes and lead the pols to the bait.

More common was the technique recalled by Hubert Bolen, who's been forest manager for Tensaw Land and Timber for over 30 years, a tall rugged fellow who told of a nearly fatal instance from his callow days. "They'd collected up these turkey eggs and hatched them out in a pen up at McIntosh, incubated them. Had a fellow up there who raised them until we needed them for a hunt. I had one of these birds one time, was holding it up in a deer blind. These fellows came along and I let that turkey go and he flew down like he was supposed to, but they didn't shoot him like they should and that bird wheeled around and flew back up to me in the blind. I thought I was a dead man for sure. Shots flying all around me, but somehow I didn't get hit."

A more likely sportsman than most pols was Big Jim Folsom, who was a frequent guest, particularly on industry-luring missions, bringing his gubernato-

Riley offers this sure-fire venison recipe, especially suited to novices of hearth and hunt alike. (No rotisserie or rifles required.)

Tenderloin of Venison a la Pontiac

Ingredients:

one venison backstrap (tenderloin)
lemon pepper
garlic powder
Worcester sauce
rasher of uncooked bacon
Dijon mustard

Take one early-model Pontiac or any other crankable chunk of Detroit pig iron. Scorch the two-lanes during rutting season until a doe or buck is rendered.

Carve from carcass one backstrap, which will provide two pieces of prime venison about two inches around and 14 inches long (enough for four Chatom plowboys, six Athelstan Club members or a Club Royale cocktail waitress). Sprinkle with lemon pepper, garlic powder and marinate overnight in Worcester sauce. Coat with Dijon mustard. Wrap with bacon strips.

Broil until medium rare, taking care not to overcook. This is tricky, because medium rare venison looks like rare beef. Don't rely entirely on your sight. Go ahead and poke it with your finger: You don't want it any firmer than that muscle between your thumb and index finger.

Slide into medallions. Serve with Kentucky bourbon or Washington County sour mash.

rial staff. According to Bob Boykin, Folsom would grill his staff (snapped to military attention) in full detail bright and early in the morning. "One of the toughest guys you'd ever seen. He took care of business, sure did," said Bob.

All the political hoopla, 28 years of it, ended in 1962, when Boykin received his first political defeat. In keeping with his largess, it was a resounding defeat. Alabama had to give up a Congressional seat following the 1960 census, and the reapportionment plan called for a statewide, low-man-out race among nine Alabama representatives. The Alabama electorate called off the hunt.

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Boykin cont.

According to Bob, "It took him about six months to get over it after being defeated, but then he went back to making money and was his old self again."

"We've kept it all together through the third generation," says Starr. "And the fourth seems to be coming along well."

Boykin died March 12, 1969, at age 84.

One day's whirlwind tour is hardly enough to scratch the surface of the Frank W. Boykin Hunting Lodge, let alone the Boykin legend. It is enough, however, to confirm the legend is still thriving — and not just in the sepia colored photos or the oft' told tales. "We've kept it all together through the third generation," says Starr

as we say our leave. "And the fourth seems to be coming along well."

The second generation, Bob and Lynn, has already left out, in Bob's Cherokee, to take one last look-see at what's stirring out in the greenfields.

A call comes over the two-way radio and Riley leans in to take it in the Cadillac. It's not a business call — such dull sublunary concerns seem banished from this retreat.

"I'm over here in Magnolia Field," Bob's syrupy voice rolls over the wireless. "There are plenty of migratory doves. Lookin' *real* good...What say we shoot it tomorrow afternoon."

We, of course, means the whole family, and business, which also means family, must itself make arrangements.

Company president Riley adjusts a contract review meeting with company secretary-treasurer Starr and the dove hunt is on for tomorrow — just before Bob and Lynn have to fly out to fish Panama.

Chris McFadyen is a staff writer for Mobile Bay Monthly
