

SILAS NOAH BUTTS

Silas Noah Butts, the "old man of the mountains," was born the tenth of thirteen children to Jacob and Mary Butts in 1880. Born and raised on the farm settled by his grandfather, Silas would eventually gain control of the farm and there raise his "adopted" children. Silas' character and personality help to illustrate why he was able to create a legacy that has lasted in Oconee County for nearly fifty years after his death. His humor and apparent "backwardness" helped to cause his fame but his underlying progressive ideas have also been part of his legacy. Silas Butts was, no doubt, an old, funny man who lived in the mountains. But he also serves as a transition between isolation, self-sufficiency and ignorance, and the new modern world outside of Appalachia with jobs and schools.

Loyal Jones, an Appalachian historian, once described the characteristics of mountain life in the essay "Appalachian Values." He described ten general categories that help people to understand native mountaineers as a "compendium of the best qualities of the Appalachian

people."¹ Whereas "Appalachian Values" was not the initial recognition of these characteristics, the brief summary of each characteristic provided by Jones allows for easy comparison, especially with Silas.

So who was this "old man from the mountains" who kept all these children up in the mountains? Almost everyone quickly remembers his voice. Johnny Ballenger and David Pitts, both from Oconee County, stated that Silas "talked real loud," and "Oh, by me, he hollered all over the mill hill!"² James Nix, a mechanic in town, saw Silas in court once and remarked, "And he talked... He talked right, real loud-- keen like, you know. You could hear him, sitting right there, you could hear him... you knowed he was there."³ Silas' voice helped to gain him recognition, not just when he was around, but among those who had never met him as well. John Bigham, a journalist who traveled up from Columbia to find Silas, remarked that he "wanted to hear his booming voice. His thunderous speech is one of the things responsible for his fame and Walhalla folks say that his presence in town is often

¹ Loyal Jones, *Appalachian Values* (Berea: Berea College Appalachian Center).

² David Pitts and Johnny Ballenger, personal interview, 13 June 2003.

³ James Nix, personal interview, 13 June 2003.

advertised by the stentorian tones he employs even in ordinary conversation."⁴ It is interesting to note that when people retell these stories about Silas, everyone imitates his high pitch, loud voice when they come to something that Silas would say.

Silas' voice is often remembered and associated with his involvement with politics. An article that appeared in 1990 reminisced that, "He took an active role in politics and with his distinctive voice, would heckle unmercifully candidates who did not meet his approval."⁵ An article at his death described this same scenario:

Silas brought the roof down, figuratively speaking at more than one political speaking. He once told us he didn't believe in aggravating the speaker, "but it shore don't hurt to ask him some questions." It was almost natural to hear his voice asking some fellow he opposed "how you done this" or "how come you didn't do that"... and for the candidate he liked... "You're doin' all right, boy."⁶

Bigham learned of Silas' involvement in politics when he visited him in 1953 and wrote:

Although he has never run for public office, he is a potent factor in county politics to the extent

⁴ John Bigham, "Silas Butts: Oconee's Rugged Individualist," *The State*, 23 August 1953.

⁵ Lowell Ross, "A Legend of Brasstown," *The Oconee Legend*, 24 May 1990.

⁶ "Silas Butts, Adopted Father of Fifty, Passes," *Keowee Courier*, 29 August 1956.

that candidates would rather have him as a friend than a foe. He talks loud and long, usually saying what he thinks and allowing the chips to fall where they may. As a result a lot of chips have fallen in many places.⁷

One of the characteristics that Jones describes is "patriotism." He writes, "We [Appalachian people] have an abiding interest in politics... we tend to relate personally to politicians who catch our fancy and appear trustworthy."⁸ Silas, particularly, left his impression at these political stump meetings.

The pitch and volume of Silas' voice were not the only unique characteristics about his speech, it was often what he said. Several interviews revealed a byword that Silas often used. Each account was slightly different but included "Sha," "Sha' Hell," and "Sha-by-doe."⁹ People often included these bywords when quoting Silas in his high-pitched voice.

Silas is also known for his wit and antics in the courtroom. Besides his appearances in court for moonshining, he appeared at the courthouse in Walhalla

⁷ Bigham.

⁸ Jones.

⁹ Carlie Butts, *A Man Called Jake* (Haverford: Infinity Publishing, 2002); Mack Lee, personal interview, 11 April 2002; Randolph Phillips, personal interview, 12 June 2003.

once after fighting a man named Broadus Hare. Each filed charges against the other, Butts against Hare in July of 1948 and Hare against Butts in March of 1949. Each time, the newspapers were sure to note Silas' performance in the courtroom:

The charges were filed by Silas Butts, Long Creek farmer and well-known Oconee county man. Mr. Butts' antics on the stand provided entertainment and amusement for the courtroom crowded with spectators.¹⁰

The next year, when Silas was on trial, the papers reported:

Butts, charged with assault and battery against Nelson Hare, conducted his own case in a hearing which fairly rocked the courtroom with laughter all afternoon.¹¹

Others present still remember Silas' appearance and performance in the courtroom on those days. David Pitts was there one of those days and explained:

They was trying him for Assault and Battery with Aggravated Nature and Intent to Kill. And after they presented all the evidence and the witnesses testified... He [the judge] asked him [Silas] if he wanted to say anything. "Yes sir. I want to show you what that man done to me. He was trying to kill me instead..." He got down in [sic] the floor and rolled and tumbled and he said, "That man was bear-hugging me and trying to kill me. I wasn't trying to

¹⁰ "Court Opens Busy Session Here Tuesday," *Keowee Courier*, 8 July 1948.

¹¹ "Special Court," *Keowee Courier*, 10 March 1949.

kill him. He was the one that was trying to kill somebody." That court just hollered.¹²

James Nix was also in the courtroom during one of Silas' court appearances and remembers:

Yeah, back in 19 and 49, I was in court on two murder cases and Silas had a case in court that same week. And what it was, was this... They had got in a fight sometime and this boy went into the service. And before they picked him up, the boy shipped out and went over seas. Well, after he come back, after he served his time over there and come back home, they picked him up you know because Silas had this warrant against him. I think assault and battery, attempt to kill, or whatever. Anyway, they got in the court and they was questioning him and he said the boy hit him in the head with an ax. So he had to show them that the... Got down and pulled his hair back and said, "You see there!" I don't even remember what they... What they ever did with the boy, whether they him time or what but you know I just happened to be there when all this motion went on.¹³

More than fifty years have passed since those two court cases but people still recall Silas' appearances in court.

Silas' choosing to represent himself in court has definitely been one of his greatest claims to fame. It is almost always noted in articles about him, even in those that appeared before his death. John Bigham described, "On occasions Mr. Butts has had differences of opinion

¹² David Pitts and Johnny Ballenger, 13 June 2003.

¹³ James Nix, 13 June 2003.

with the law as represented by Oconee County. Scorning the services of an attorney at such times, Silas brilliantly argues his case with varying degrees of success."¹⁴ At Silas' death, one obituary remembered the time(s) when Silas acted as his own lawyer:

Many recall one instance several years back where Silas was both a defendant and a plaintiff in one day. It seems some fellow in Westminster grew angry and whacked him on the head one day... and Silas, not one to back away, put in a few whacks himself. When court time arrived, both had sworn out warrants for the other.

The other fellow was tried first with Silas taking the stand as the star witness. He was found guilty and then it was Silas' turn. He served as his own attorney, and so swayed the jury with his homemade legal terms that he came clear with jury hardly having to retire. His short stint in the attorney's role was perhaps his most memorable moment. He referred to it many times afterward... while grinning practically from ear to ear.¹⁵

Interestingly, the story at his death combined the two court sessions, did not mention the "other" fellow's name, and reported that Silas got off clean. This method of "remembering" is an example of why Silas is remembered so many years after his death.

Another characteristic of Appalachian people explained by Jones is "Individualism, Self Reliance and

¹⁴ Bigham.

¹⁵ "Silas Butts, Adopted Father of 50, Passes."

Pride." Silas' acting as his own lawyer fits this description. Jones writes, "the person who could not look after himself and his family was to be pitied." Jones tells the story of one old lady back in some hollow who became snowed in for weeks and the Red Cross volunteers finally got to her house to offer their assistance. When she learned that they were from the Red Cross she replied, "'Well, I don't believe I'm going to be able to help you'ns any this year. It's been a right hard winter.'"¹⁶ Obviously, mountain people, including Silas, figured that they could take care of themselves.

One interesting characteristic about Silas is his dual personality between the "backwards," old, traditional mountain man and a very modern man for his time. Traditionalism is one characteristic often associated with the "mountaineer." One historian, Jack Weller, explains this in an essay entitled, "Introducing the Mountaineer." He explains that the mountaineer is "bound to the past in an amazing way... Mountain life, as it has continued in its more or less static way, has preserved the old traditions and ideas, even encouraged

¹⁶ Jones.

them."¹⁷ Weller uses two sets of words to set the mountaineer apart from the rest of American culture: progressive versus regressive, and "existence oriented" versus "improvement oriented." Silas is often termed "the old man of the mountains" and yet, he represents the progressive and improvement aspects of American culture as well.

First of all, there is no doubt that Silas represents the romanticized view of a mountaineer. Silas was a moonshiner who could not read or write, living on land at the edge of Appalachia settled by his grandfather. His mountain, "backward" ways are often remembered in stories. For instance, one story that is often told about Silas that illustrates his humor as well as his isolation is best recalled by Dot Jackson, a local journalist and author, in an article in the *Charlotte Observer*:

You know he used to take his boys and go down into Anderson selling produce. Well, he had never seen a traffic light. And they put some up in Anderson, and one day he came to town and he ran one.

Well, a cop came after him and said, "say-- you just ran a red light." And Silas said, "Boys, lets get out and see what this man's a-talking about." So

¹⁷ Jack Weller, "Introducing the Mountaineer," *Appalachia: Its People, Heritage and Problems*, ed. Frank S. Riddel (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1974), 43-44.

they looked under the car and all around, and finally Silas says, "We've not run over any light as I can see." And the cop says, "Oh, go on back up yonder where you come from." And let 'em go.¹⁸

Whether or not this is true and, whether or not Silas was playing dumb, is beside the point because this is how Silas is often remembered.

Silas' traditional values are also characterized in a civil court dispute over property lines. A typed statement, crudely signed by "S. N. Butts" reads:

I am the defendant in this action. I have promised to buy the land described in the complaint for \$450.00 net to the plaintiffs. That is all or more than the place is worth. It is my father's and grand-father's old home place, and that is one reason that I am willing to pay that sum for it. It is [sic] was not for that I would not give that much for the place.¹⁹

Jones claims this to be another of "the best qualities of the Appalachian people" in what he calls "Love of Place." He writes, "It is one of the unifying values of mountain people, this attachment to one's place, and it is a great problem to those who urge mountaineers to find their destiny outside the mountains."²⁰ Silas obviously

¹⁸ Dot Jackson, "Orphanage Ran on Corn," *The Charlotte Observer*, 16 October 1974.

¹⁹ *Mary T. Butts, et al. vs. Silas N. Butts*, 1939.

²⁰ Jones.

maintained a connection with the land as well as his traditional views associated with the family "home place."

Silas was also noted for certain abilities in medicine, or as a healer. When John Bigham visited Louisa at the Butts' farm, he found Louisa "discussing among other things whether Mrs. Chastain, a boarder with the family, should visit the faith preacher and be healed of her rheumatism or risk it being "rubbed away" by Silas who possesses some reputation in the countryside as a man of medicine."²¹ Clem Smith remembers that, "He knew how to stop blood, draw fire and different things, cure the thrash on the baby and everything."²² Silas seemed to represent all that was characteristic of a "mountain man."

However, Silas was not all tradition, nor does he fit all the stereotypes that Weller and Jones describe. Silas supposedly had the second tractor in the area.²³ In fact, one article described him as "no old-fashioned farmer in spite of his lingo and constant guffawing over

²¹ Bigham.

²² Clem Smith, personal interview, 25 February 2003.

²³ Ibid.

'these new-fangled notions.' He never allowed a mule or horse where a tractor would go."²⁴ Reporter, John Bigham, picked up on Silas' modern twist in one of the pictures he took on his visit to Brasstown Valley. The captions read, "Note modern farm tractor. Silas once had a TV set but it kept the boys from their chores so he returned it to the dealer."²⁵ A posthumous article reveals this same notion that:

Silas believed in the modern way of doing things and this attitude was evident in the bountiful crops grown on the Butts' farm. In fact, Silas was among the first few farmers in upper Oconee to raise beef cattle on a sizable scale.²⁶

These characteristics, along with Silas' short career in town working in the mill (as will be seen), and the schoolhouse that he built for his orphan children, portrays Silas as a progressive man instead of a man opposed to change.

Silas' demeanor is another characteristic that is often remembered in many different ways. Usually, he is described as a kind and generous man. Obviously, people

²⁴ "Silas Butts, Adopted Father of 50, Passes."

²⁵ Bigham.

²⁶ Jerry Alexander, "Silas Butts Remembered as 'Old Man of the Mountains,'" *The Anderson Independent*, 27 February 1968.

recall his generosity in taking in all the mountain children who needed a home, but, this is not the only generosity exemplified by Silas. Randolph Phillips, Silas' nephew, recalls, "He helped a lot of people. My wife's mother, they brought them food one time when they were about to starve to death, Silas did."²⁷ This reflects yet another of Jones' characteristics: "Neighborliness and Hospitality." He explains that mountain people are "hospitable, quick to invite to you in and generous with the food." In essence, this is remembered of Silas in a very broad sense due to his hospitality portrayed by "taking in" the orphans.

Also, an obituary noted, "of how he often helped people out financially, even paying bond to get the errant out of jail."²⁸ Another recalled this same generous aspect, "if he thought there was merit to some defendant now and then, he wouldn't hesitate to post bond for him."²⁹ It appears that Silas did just that for Calvin Blackwell, charged with Housebreaking, Larceny, etc.

²⁷ Randolph Phillips, 12 June 2003.

²⁸ "Silas Butts, Kindly Mountaineer Dies of Heart Attack Sunday," *Seneca Journal and Tugalo Tribune*, 29 August 1956.

²⁹ "Silas Butts, Adopted Father of 50, Passes."

Blackwell, however, did not show for court when his time came, and Silas was summoned to court. Blackwell had since been sentenced to seventeen years in jail in Georgia for another crime.³⁰ No matter the case, Silas did post bond for Blackwell and this was remembered of Silas for years to come.

One characteristic that Jones describes, "Modesty," is difficult to attach to Silas. A neighbor to Silas remembers, "If he [Silas] didn't like you, he'd tell you right quick."³¹ Jones claims that "there is little competition among mountaineers, except in... who has the best dog." The latter part, at least, seems to be true of Silas. A nephew to Silas told a story about a bear hunt in which everyone's smokehouse in the area had been broken into. So, the men of the community got together with all of their dogs.

Ol' Silas said that bear whipped all them dogs. Said that his dog, said that "If they'd a-just let my dog in there," said that "we wouldn't of had to went no further than... My dog would have killed it, and dressed it and had it gutted and sliced up and... waiting on them when we got there."³²

³⁰ *The State vs. S.N. Butts*, 1952.

³¹ Clem Smith, 25 February 2003.

³² Randolph Phillips, 12 June 2003.

Silas does not seem to be the type to withhold his thoughts on anyone or anything.

Describing Silas Butts is not complete without mentioning his humor. Most of the stories that remain about him recount some amusing aspect of his personality. Johnny Ballenger remembers:

Well they had waited about a day before Halloween and they had a little girl, Carol, and they hadn't bought her a pumpkin to make a jack-o-lantern. All the pumpkins was sold. And she said, "Well, let's go up to Silas'. If anybody's got one, Silas has got a pumpkin." It was on Sunday and she had come home and we all got in the car. She was still dressed like she went to church. Drove up there in the yard, Silas and his wife, three or four kids sitting on the front porch. She got out, Jerry did, and had on high heel shoes, walked about like from here to that tree out there going toward... Silas raised up, looked, and said, "Lord God woman, them shoes killing your feet?" He didn't speak, "How yall doing?" "I'm Silas Butts." Them high heeled shoes is what bothered him.³³

Almost all casual encounters with Silas left people laughing about it for years.

One well-known humorous incident concerning Silas was when word got out that he had drowned. John Bigham picked up on this story on his visit to the mountains to find Silas and wrote:

There was the time when the radio reported that Silas had fallen in his millpond and drowned. Great

³³ David Pitts and Johnny Ballenger, 13 June 2003.

gloom fell upon the county and a truckload of flowers, a tribute from people in all walks of Oconee life, headed for the home in the hills. Silas had to literally live down the false report and later informed Enos Abott that "Don't you think I would have been the first one to know about it if I had been drowned?"³⁴

As with many other stories, these illustrate the humor that is almost always present when stories are told of Silas Butts and helps to fuel his legacy.

Jones describes "Sense of Humor" as the characteristic that "has sustained us [mountain people]."

He writes:

Sometimes the humor reflects hard times, like when a woman went to the governor to ask him to pardon her husband who was in the penitentiary. "What's he in for?" The Governor asked. "For stealing a ham." "Is he a good man?" "No, he's a mean man." "Is he a hard worker?" "No, he won't hardly work at all." "Well, why would you want a man like that pardoned?" "Well, Governor, we're out of ham."³⁵

In many ways, the times were hard during Silas' life. His "hay day" involved two World Wars and the Great Depression, not to mention the poverty often associated with rural Appalachia. As Jones suggests though, it was humor that helped to sustain mountain people like Silas.

³⁴ Bigham.

³⁵ Jones.

According to Jones, "one must understand the religion of mountaineers before he can begin to understand mountaineers."³⁶ Not much is known about Silas' religious thoughts or practices. His neighbor, Clem Smith, told:

And they's one thing about Silas, he carried them kids to church. He had a Ford pickup and he'd take, five, six, seven of them. One night, they's having a meeting up there and he drove plumb back down to Brasstown and left one of them laying on a bank asleep... They'd join every church they'd go to.³⁷

Silas is buried at Damascus Baptist Church with his wife's family (Rholetter) instead of at the Butts family graveyard. Before he built his own school, the children attended school at the nearby Brasstown Church. If Jones is correct, then a certain understanding of Silas cannot be obtained due to the scarcity in information about his religious beliefs.³⁸

Silas Butts was no ordinary man. Few people have left such an impression on people as to cause them to

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Clem Smith, 25 February 2003.

³⁸ One interview did reveal a certain amount of information about Silas and religion but at the interviewee's request, the information is not included here. The insistence to exclude the information does reveal the seriousness associated, especially amongst the older generations of Oconee County, with personal religion.

recall stories of them time and time again. Silas had many traits that, when combined, created this impression. He was traditional in some respects, though in many ways, a very modern man. With a man such as Silas, legends often play an important role in how someone is remembered.