

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

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Bullwhip Bascom and Brother Joe's missionary Journey to the Heathen Islands

From the writer's novel The Short End of the Doubletree

"Bullwhip Bascom has been arrested in Nashville for drunk and disorderly conduct," the newscaster said. After the bombing of Pearle Harbor, Hollywood no longer cared for Bullwhip's westerns and his contract wasn't renewed. He wandered about until he landed in Nashville, the country music capital.

On a cold Sunday morning in January, nineteen-forty-four, Brother Joe, the pastor of a church in Zeb's Crossing called the Lighthouse, more commonly known as the Nuthouse, was listening to the news as he drove to church in his 1942 Oldsmobile the pitifully poor members of the Lighthouse had bought for him just before the war. Most couldn't afford cars for themselves but they didn't mind sacrificing for Brother Joe. Joe was the most faithful among God's servants, probably the only one standing totally true. In church, after the usual delirium, Joe stood behind the pulpit.

"Brothers and sisters, Jesus said I was in prison and ye visited me. Most of you know that Bullwhip Bascom has been imprisoned in Nashville. I intend to visit him, but I'm short of gas stamps. With the rationing, I have a hard time getting about to do the work of the Lord. Do any of you have any to spare. God will bless you for giving them up for the ministry. Many of you give some of your stamps to me every month, but you aren't giving them to me, but to the Lord's work."

Today he would get a few more. Most don't have autos anyway.

"Tomorrow, I'm going to Nashville and deliver Bullwhip Bascom from the bondage of prison," Brother Joe said, as he wiped his eyes with a handkerchief.

Monday morning Joe drove to the jail in Nashville and paid Bullwhips fine, then took him to the boarding house in the mill village at the Crossing, and paid for a room. The following Wednesday night, Bullwhip was on the platform with Joe at the Lighthouse.

Zeb's Crossing is a cluster of businesses that grew up around the cotton mill where the narrow gauge rail line bridges the shallow river at the county line. The track runs from Jefferson, county seat of Davis County, through Zeb's Crossing into Choctaw, the seat of Chickasaw County, and ends at the mountains about twenty miles from the Crossing, in a college and resort area. A ski lodge and a summer camp there are served by the railroad. With the war and gas rationing, the only way most can get to the area is by rail, so the line is profitable again, not losing money as in the past decade. The mill is the primary provider of income for the railroad.

Zeb's General Store, built where the old dirt road fords the river, gave the area its name. The old road and the crossing have been there since pioneer days, long before the railroad and mill came. The new paved highway bypassed the Crossing, regardless of the mill owner's protest.

The bridge on the highway about a half-mile downstream can be seen from the Crossing.

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Brother Joe lives in Jefferson, several miles from his church. He grew up in the Crossing but living there no longer fits his lifestyle. He prefers not to have the people of the Lighthouse too near anyway. While they never believe any ill reports about Brother Joe, it wouldn't do to have them around on Friday or Saturday night. Joe would probably claim to be ministering to the people in the clubs, and his people would believe him, but it could be embarrassing on some occasions. Joe thought of moving further away, but gas rationing ended that idea.

Joe's mother, Sis Bradley, owns the Buzzards Roost, a poolroom and chili parlor in the Crossing. Before Prohibition, it had been a tavern. The rusty old sign still hangs over the door. Folk from the area outside the Crossing say that Sis makes chili that few can swallow and none can digest, none but the denizens of Zeb's Corners of course, and the no-account poolroom loafers from the area that hang out there. No one knows where Sis gets beef for her chili. Beef is almost never found in the stores, it goes to the armed forces, but Sis has a source, though she won't say what it is.

Sis sells chili and hot dogs over the counter; and under the counter, a semi-pernicious corn product distilled in the mountains by her cousin Amos, take-out only. Cousin Lukey runs a load in every Wednesday which Sis usually sells out by Saturday evening. Prohibition ended in 1933, but there is still some demand for moonshine. Moonshine is cheaper than bonded liquor, and many prefer it over bonded anyway. Each Friday evening, Judge Fleming comes by to refill his jug, complimentary of course. His tastes lean toward bonded but he says the price of mountain dew is better. A gratuity to Sheriff Scott's campaign fund keeps his eyes averted.

Brother Joe led the temperance fight when FDR brought back demon rum. He hoped to keep Davis County dry—legal booze hurts the moonshine business—but he failed, and a bar opened in Zeb's Crossing. The bar sells only beer, so Sis soon realized they each had different customers. She and the bar owner became friends, each business attracting customers for the other. Brother Joe's flock, Joe says they are his sheep and sheep were made to be sheered, are mostly workers from the mill and a few sharecroppers that farm the bottom land along the river, and some construction workers and employees of the stores. His members are certain that Joe knows nothing about the moonshine Sis sells.

Brother Joe is also a revivalist, raising the large tent anywhere a dollar could be made. The pickin's were slim during the Depression, but prosperity came with the start of the war and even Joe is astounded by the take. He sets up in the same towns year after year, but the townspeople never get wise to Joe's scam. They are always excited when he advertises that he is coming with his tent, almost as if a carnival or circus is coming to town.

Wednesday night Joe was behind the pulpit at the Lighthouse.

"Sisters and brothers, I delivered Mr. Bascom from the bondage of prison and as we drove back to Davis County, he was marvelously converted. Brother Bullwhip will be joining me on my crusades. We're goin' to drive sin and evil out of Davis County, and every place I put up the old gospel tent."

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The congregation responded shouting glory and amen while Bullwhip cracked the whip, then Bullwhip took his seat on the platform. Brother Joe placed a Bible on the pulpit and read several verses. which in no way bore upon the sermon. Joe huffed and puffed and panted and chanted. Sometimes he shouted, sometimes he whispered. He drank water from a glass on the pulpit then wiped sweat from his face. He was on his knees then jumping up and down. He ran back and forth in the aisle amid the shouting and crying.

Brother Joe preaches miracles, signs and wonders, healing and deliverance. Had anyone gone to more than one of Joe's crusades, he would have seen the same people were healed that were healed in he last town where Joe raised his tent. The locals who come to be healed are always disappointed.

"If you don't get healed, it's because you don't have faith," Joe bellows. "You must make a prove your faith offering if you want to be healed."

Preacher Joe compares to true ministers as Indian Snake Oil peddlers in traveling medicine shows compare to real doctors.

Joe begins his tent crusades when the weather warms in the Spring, usually in April, some years in March. He folds the tent for the winter in mid-October. In the cold seasons, he preaches revivals in other churches similar to the Lighthouse. This year, he ended each night of his tent crusades and revivals with a new plea.

"I must raise funds for a missionary journey to the heathen islands. The people of my church are too poor to pay for my journey, so I prayed about it and God spoke to me in a vision." "My beloved Joe, tell my people about your burden for the head-hunters and cannibals. I have a special blessing for those who have the faith to sacrifice their money for your missionary journey."

"God wants you to be rich but He can't bless you because you don't believe Him. If you give, you will receive a hundred fold; if you don't give, you are putting stripes on Jesus," Joe moaned while Bullwhip cracked the whip.

Driven by guilt or greed, many gave their last dollars to support Preacher Joe's missionary journey to the heathen islands. In the last week of November, Joe preached the last revival scheduled for the year. He was resting at home a few weeks at Christmas before going on his missionary journey to preach to the pagans, preaching only at the Lighthouse these weeks.

Brother Joe preaches every Sunday morning and evening at the Lighthouse, unless the tent is too far away for the drive back, or if the pastors of churches where he preaches revivals insist that he be there on Sunday. Sister Gussie ministers when Joe is away, always on Wednesday night, and sometimes on Friday or Saturday night. The folk at the Lighthouse don't partake of sinful worldly pleasures such as movies, dancing, or ballgames; the Lighthouse is their entertainment. With the end of the revivals, Brother Joe and Bullwhip will be in the Lighthouse for all the meetings during the Christmas Season.

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The first Sunday in December, the singers and musicians had stirred the congregation to its usual frenzy, some did holy dances; others walked the tops of the benches, all were weeping or shouting. Then Preacher Joe stepped to the pulpit.

"Beloved, I asked Brother Bullwhip to go with me on my missionary journey to the heathen islands. I hesitated to ask him because I didn't have the right to ask someone else to risk his life to take the message to the pagans. Brother Bullwhip graciously and bravely offered to go. But I lack funds to pay for his journey."

Sister Gussie spoke up.

"We figured you'd ask Brother Bullwhip to go and we already arranged to raise the money for his trip. The ladies are usin' their sugar ration stamps for a bake sale, and we're goin' to have Saturday night singin's to raise money. Singers are comin' from churches all around to help. Brother Bullwhip 's way will be paid."

Joe wiped tears from his dry eyes. "I knew I could count on the people of the Lighthouse. You never let me down; and I don't want to ever let you down."

Crying and shouting filled the auditorium. The people of the Lighthouse were poor but they didn't mind sacrificing and working for Brother Joe.

The Sunday morning before Christmas Brother Joe was in the pulpit. "You have worked and sacrificed to help pay for our missionary journey to the heathen islands and you will be blessed. We still don't have adequate funds to make the journey but God told me to go, and with or without funds, we are going."

Sister Ethel shouted, "Why don't we take up a happy birthday Jesus offering."

Joe bowed his head. "Would you do that for me? I'm humbled; I don't know what to say."

The plates were passed and the offerings were counted.

"We have ninety-six dollars," Deacon Spivey said.

"We were a hundred dollars short of our need," Brother Joe said, "but we can make it on that." The lighthouse people had saved their gas ration stamps for Brother Joe. The day after Christmas, he and Bullwhip drove off in his Oldsmobile. A night in a motel and the next stop would be Key West where they board the ferry to Havana and the casino in the hotel where reservations had been made. Sister Gussie ministered while Joe was away.

"Oh brothers and sisters, pray for Brother Joe. He's goin' to be in danger in the heathen islands preaching to the cannibals and head-hunters "

"Sister Gussie, what if he don't come back. What will we do without him?" Sister Hester said.

"God will protect him if we pray enough," Gussie said. "We must meet every day and pray for his safe return."

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The ferry docked in Havana, Joe and Bullwhip checked in at their hotel, left their baggage in the room, and went to the casino across the road. They lost a few dollars at the roulette table, then walked to the beach.

"Bullwhip, this is something else. I've been to the beaches in the Carolinas but they are not like this."

"I know. I came here once before. This beats any I ever saw. California beaches are cold"

A few days later at the hotel's new-year's eve party, Bullwhip was a sensation with the Cubans, who had seen his movies. He would crack the whip and tell scandalous stories about Hollywood in exchange for drinks, then dance the rumba with the pretty Cuban girls. Bullwhip did a fair tango when he visited Brazil, but the Cubans didn't know the dance "Bullwhip, I think this is the best new years eve party I've ever been to."

"Yeah. It's even better than the ones we had in Hollywood. I'm glad I came."

Through the next two weeks they bounced from the casino to the beach to the bars until they had spent most of their money, mostly at the casino.

"Bullwhip, we're runnin' out of money but ain't it been fun? We need to head for home while we still have enough to get there. Maybe we can come back next year and preach to the heathen again," Joe snickered. "When we get home, I'm going to let the other...uh...preachers take care of the tent crusades. I have an idea for a new, shall we say, ministry."

They packed their suitcases, had one last walk on the beach, then took their leave of Havana, arriving at the Crossing on Saturday night. Sunday morning both were in the Lighthouse. After the special music by singers from several similar churches invited to come to the Lighthouse to celebrate Brother Joe's safe return, Joe stepped to the pulpit.

"Beloved, spread the word that next weekend I will be telling about our fraught with peril missionary journey to preach to the pagans in the heathen islands. I am renting the county auditorium in Jefferson on Friday evening and Saturday. Tell all your friends who don't come to the Lighthouse. Tell the folks in the country churches, even though they don't believe like us. Everybody needs to be there. I ask the clerk to send letters to all the churches where I preach revivals. We want to fill the auditorium."

The radio station that broadcasts Joe's weekly messages was glad to give him several spots to advertise the meeting. A large ad was printed in the local paper. Flyers were nailed on telephone posts. Friday evening the auditorium was filled to overflow.

Pastors of churches where Joe preached brought their best singers and musicians for the celebration of Joe's successful campaign among the pagans, all anxious to hear about Joe's crusade in the heathen islands. The singers and musicians stirred the crowd to a religious frenzy while Bullwhip cracked the whip. Amid the fever, Brother Joe stepped to the rostrum and raised his hands to hush the crowd.

"My faithful friends, I have been blessed to carry your message to the pagans in the heathen islands."

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Before he could speak again, the door burst open and the sheriff walked in.

"We are not going to have this in my county; you are under arrest for preaching on county property without a permit." With that he clamped the cuffs on Preacher Joe and led him to the jail on the next block, and locked him in one of the two cells.

The news of Brother Joe's arrest spread like clouds in a hurricane. Newspapers and radio stations were reporting this terrible thing that nobody thought could happen in America.

"Aren't we fighting a terrible war for freedom, especially religious freedom," one broadcaster said Saturday morning, a lawyer secured a writ from Judge Fleming for Joe's release and accompanied by reporters, presented it to Sheriff Scott. Scott sent a deputy to open Joe's cell and tell him he was free to go, but Joe wouldn't leave. Remembering an incident in the Apostle Paul's life in which he demanded that the city leaders come and ask him to leave the jail, Joe refused to budge.

"Let Sheriff Scott come and ask me to leave; he put me in here."

This Scott reluctantly did.

A car was waiting at the curb to take Brother Joe to the auditorium, only a block away, where an overflow crowd had gathered. Religious leaders from five states had come to protest the arrest of Preacher Joe, and most were not of Joe's denomination. Joe entered the auditorium with head slightly bowed, reaching out to the hands extended to him as he walked down the aisle. At the platform a faithful disciple offered his arm which Joe humbly accepted and let the man help him ascend the steps, then walking to the pulpit, Joe bade the crowd to cease cheering. When the auditorium was quiet, Joe began to speak.

"Beloved brothers and sisters, I count it joy to be thought worthy of being cast into the dungeon for preaching."

The auditorium exploded. There was shouting and weeping, and holy dances in the aisles.

When the turmoil finally subsided, Joe stood silent behind the pulpit.

"You should sue the county," someone shouted.

"Bring federal charges against the sheriff," another yelled.

"What are you going to do?" one of the more sane pastors asked.

Joe stood quietly for a moment, wiping tears from his eyes, then he said, "I'm going to forgive him."

Silence fell on the crowd. Some were ashamed for wanting vengeance. Many were in tears. Some had to sit down, almost fainting. They had never heard such compassion. Softly and slowly

Joe spoke again. "You know that Sheriff Scott lost the election and in a few days will be out of a job. I want everyone who hears my voice to pray for Sheriff Scott."

Almost every pastor in the building arranged for Joe to preach a re-

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vival or conference in his church. Churches in distant states sent telegrams asking Joe to come. Of course Bullwhip was with him in all the meetings. In churches like the Lighthouse Joe puffed and chanted while Bullwhip cracked the whip. In mainline churches he was the master of decorum. Brother Joe is no Amateur.

Two years have passed and the last revival has been preached, A weary but happy Brother Joe visits the home of one of his oldest and dearest friends, former sheriff Scott.

“I believe our agreement was for fifteen percent of the take, after expenses of course.”