

MARION COUNTY GOTHIC

BY ERIC FRANCIS

I WAS STANDING AT A DIRT CROSSROADS near . . . well, near not much of anything, really, except the Buffalo River and a few cabins that wouldn't see use until vacationing weather. *Go down thataway*, I was told, *until you see the school bus*.

So I did.

This was on a chilly March day, and I was tagging along with a group of wildland firefighters who were actually there to start blazes rather than stop them. It was a prescribed burn, intended to clear out most of the leaves, deadfall and other material that could fuel a big wildfire once the weather got hotter and drier. The private land along this ridge was right up next to the Lower Buffalo Wilderness Area, so it was being burnt off, too. Fire doesn't pay much attention to metes and bounds, after all.

I walked maybe a couple of miles along that road before I passed through a gate and saw the school-bus homestead. There wasn't much of the bus to be seen, actually. It was mostly covered with tarps, its windows curtained from the inside, underpinned with pieces of plastic and aluminum to keep the wind and varmints from beneath it. But the shape was unmistakable, and that signature yellow shone through here and there. No two ways about it—up here on a mostly flat, mostly clear spot at the end of a dirt road in the deepest Ozarks, somebody had turned an old school bus into their home.

I'm sure to a certain group of folks—the “paddle faster, I hear banjos” crowd, you might say—this sort of scene represents the most unfortunate stereotypes of Arkansas hill country, making it something to be ashamed of or at least not to mention in polite company. But I figure home is what you make it, even if that's a derelict school bus.

There was more than just that bus, mind you. There was also an old RV trailer, up on blocks and with a window A/C unit jerry-rigged to it, though that looked like it hadn't been occupied for some time. A little storage shed, a big plastic water tank, a few burn barrels and some extension cords that

made me believe there was a generator tucked away somewhere. A small garden plot, too—maybe an herb garden—fenced in against predatory deer. And up by the hillside, a piece of plywood riddled with holes was evidence of target practice.

All the comforts, as they say. Well, maybe not as those of us raised in metropolitan suburbia imagine such comforts. It was quiet, and it was beautiful, though, and can you blame someone for living in such a spot, however far removed from what we city folk deign to call “the conveniences”? Perhaps not.

But then there was the cemetery.

It was scant yards from the bus, just where the land started to rise again. Not the kind of rural graveyard I was used to encountering, with an iron fence

(or at least chain link) surrounding carefully laid-out plots, weather-worn slabs of marble or granite silently offering testament. Instead, a semi-circular arrangement of rocks marked its perimeter, and more rocks marked the graves. Pets' graves mostly, much-beloved family companions gone the way of all flesh. Here and there were larger stones, bearing names in paint or stuck-on letters. Ceramic figurines of German shepherds and Rottweilers caught my eye, as did sun-bleached tortoise shells and deer antlers, and colorful ribbons waving in the breeze. It was hard to say how many graves there were, all told. Six, 10? A dozen? They were clustered close, one pile of rocks encroaching upon another.

But as I said, it was only mostly pets. For at one end stood a piece of sheet metal serving as a tombstone, upon it the names of two men, one born in the '30s and one in the '50s. They shared a surname, and that made me wonder if they were father and son; they were born awfully far apart to be brothers, though I couldn't discount the possibility, or maybe stepbrothers or cousins.

It was their ashes that were interred beneath that grave marker, not their bodies, the firefighting crew chief told me. His men had taken care in clearing around the cemetery so that neither bulldozers cutting fire breaks nor the burn that was now well under way would encroach upon the resting place of those two men. But even had it only been animals buried in the small graveyard, I'll warrant the men would have shown the same respect.

Standing there on that ridgetop, the temperature dropping despite the low flames crawling across the leafy ground, I thought about that cemetery, mere steps from the bus where one or both of these men had likely lived. The scene certainly encouraged maudlin reflection. Smoke was writhing through the branches all around me, dimming the bright spring sun and making my eyes burn. Here and there a hollow tree would catch fire, burning from the inside out as air was sucked through it with a dull roar, feeding it like a furnace until the whole thing collapsed. Firefighters gathered in twos and

threes, jawing with each other while keeping a weather eye on the flames, or wandering off to start more fires once they were pleased with the progress of this one. There was no birdsong, birds having the sense not to hang around where breathing is a chore.

Surreal? Maybe gothic? I don't blame anyone who would think so. But it dawned upon me that the school bus and the cemetery were actually the least surreal elements of that whole scene. Home, after all, is where your loved ones are. And maybe up there in the hills of Marion County, they like to hold those things a little more closely than we do back in the cities.

Columnist Eric Francis calls North Little Rock his home.

