

YALE ST. ICE HOUSE

By Ron Stahl



The ‘Ice House’ was a holdover from the pre-World War II days of supplying block ice for iceboxes of residents living in the lower Heights area of Houston, Texas.

For a while after the war Icemen still delivered ice by horse cart, that is if you had remembered to put the sign in your window with the right corner of the sign on top indicating the weight wanted, be it 10-25 pounds. But, times were changing, the new electric refrigerators soon became a household necessity.

After World War One, Augie, the present owner, emigrated from Naples, Italy to New York, where he became a successful ice monger. A few years after the passing of his wife he moved to Houston with his daughter and bought the Ice House on Yale Street. Over time he took note of the dwindling sales of block ice to the delivery carts and converted his large block-ice locker to a wholesale beer distribution center. He expanded the ice house with a large covered patio looking out over the wooded branch of the White Oak Bayou that meandered down from Northeast of Houston.



Picnic tables, a juke-box with the latest 45 rpm disk player, and a rinky-dink piano made the place a popular neighborhood gathering spot to relax and down a beer or two. Root Beer and RC Cola kept the younger set satisfied, along with the fixings from Augie's daughter's well stocked deli. Her popular 'Hoogie' and 'Poor Boy' sandwiches were the best.

Plus, the huge glass jars of pickled eggs, pig's feet and red-hot sausages that adorned her counter-top, selling from 10-50 cents a pop.



People drifted in and out without any particular purpose, maybe to buy bread, milk or to socialize with their neighbors. Oft times people would show up as if a meeting had been called and a hearty discussion often ensued, much like a town-hall gathering, be it some neighborhood event or politics.

Television was in its infancy, reception was poor. Radio was still King. Friday, Saturday and Sunday afternoons the place was crowded as local amateur musicians (along with their family and supporters) showed off their talents in an open Jam-session. The crowd was vocal and expressed their approvals or disapprovals in good nature.

Those showing talent found money in their hats or Kitty-Jars which were laid out on the floor in front of them.

I wasn't a beer drinker though I did enjoy what was called a 'Set-Up'; a stiff wax-paper bowl of crushed ice, lemon slices and a wax paper-cup with water, Coke or 7-Up, and my 'VO' in a 'Brown-Paper-Sack' sitting on the floor, as required by the strict local 'alcoholic beverage laws'.

Augie wasn't cheap, I considered him to be thrifty. He never paid or hired a band. Instead he would allow them floor time, an occasional beer and sandwich, but only if they were good. He never encouraged a long-time stand; he did like ol' fashion Country Music and on occasion he would allow this new bluesy style of country music that seemed to be attracting big name record artists with their disjointed rhythm, along with heart-wrenching, love-gone-wrong songs. The audience seemed to want more and often joined in on the choruses.

My wife and I became frequent visitors. I wasn't much into country music, coming from Southern California, and listening to big bands like Harry James, Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller were more to my liking.

Having spent time in the Philippines, I had learned to tolerate their crude renditions which flowed out of every makeshift dive and tavern. Maybe it was the 'Tuba juice' or some other concoction they tried to pass off as liquor. A couple of guys plucking acoustic guitars, belting out Ernest Tubb's 'Filipino Baby'...we really hadn't much choice but to listen, or we could've stayed at our tents sucking on 3.2 bottles and smoking our free and moldy 'Phillip Morris or Old Golds.'

A few years after the war I was employed on the Graveyard shift as a Tool & Die maker at a large Oil Tool Manufacturing Company, which kind-of curtailed my night life. Television was just beginning to make the scene, but still too high a cost when trying to buy a home and start a family. Our first need was dependable transportation. I bought a late model car and on a Sunday morning we decided to drive the 60 plus miles to Galveston. What a disappointment; too long a drive, two hours down and three hours back, lousy roads and traffic nightmares everywhere.

One Friday evening with my daughter on my lap, I sat relaxing with friends and neighbors at the Ice House. My wife Madge, always cleared the tables voluntarily, her reward was that on occasion a band or group would invite her to sing with them ala 'Jean Shepard' or 'Kitty Wells' style.

This one evening while the musical group was on their break, they went to all the tables inviting everyone to go Sunday to Magnolia Gardens on San Jacinto River and celebrate Mother's Day. The group had been invited to play during the head liner's breaks and recesses. Moms and kids get in free.

We went; what a pleasant family outing! Beautiful white sandy beach, slow moving river, bar-b-que ribs and chicken, beer and a big-name Country band; all at an affordable price.

Madge's brother, John Oliver, and his wife, Billie Fay, recently up-rooted from New Orleans, moved in with us until he could find work.

The Ice House became very popular and needed a bartender. John Oliver was hired and Augie wound up getting two workers for the price of one as Billie Fay enjoyed serving the tables. It wasn't as good a deal as Augie first thought 'cause unbeknown to Augie, Johnny could down as much beer as he sold. His saving grace, he was a people person and knew how to handle unruly customers without offending them.

I was off work because of a work injury when a wrench snapped fracturing a bone in my wrist. I wound up being off for several weeks.



I spent many hours at the Ice House. I became kind of an expert on the many variations of playing Dominos; my winnings covered my bar tab plus much of it was fed into the juke box. I became addicted to this new twist of country music, with its raunchy and suggestive lyrics, every song telling a story of heartaches and broken

promises. They brought up memories of my younger escapades, including a 'Dear John Letter' I received because of my misunderstanding, at the time, of what love was really all about.

Houston was like an anchor in the Southern bible-belt chain; it's church-going worshipers condemned all versions of this new 'honky-tonk' genre, accusing it of being 'drunken adulterous trash.'

That may have been so, but had they ever really listened to 'Webb Pierce' or 'Hank Williams' pour their heart out, telling renditions of 'troubling times' always at their own expense? It wasn't the musical back-ups that carried the songs, but honest soulful portrayal of life as they found it. Can it be, that those songs, jogged that forgotten spark that dwells in most all of us.

Another popular choice on the juke-box at the time was ‘I love you so much it hurts me’ by Jimmy Wakely along with ‘Slipping around’ and you could tell how popular they were, they were being played by big named Pop Singers.

About ten o’clock on a lazy Monday evening, my wife and I were about to turn in when Billie Fay came rushing in the house out of breath, saying that John Oliver needed help at the Ice House. There was a man talking all kinds of nonsense. Johnny said the man had tears in his eyes and was acting very strange. He didn’t know how to handle him and that Augie and his daughter had taken off, visiting kin-folk in New Orleans.

After I hurriedly dressed, Billie Fay and I drove the few blocks to the Ice House.

On entering I saw a light complexion, toothy, 30-35-year-old guy strumming a beautiful, inlaid acoustical guitar. His head was nodding and weaving from side-to-side with his rendition of this new Honky-Tonk music.

I could tell, this guy was in a heap of emotional pain. I asked Billie Fay to bring a Set-up and a clean damp bar towel. I tried to talk to the man but I couldn’t get him to quit singing. I thought he might be on some kind of drug, he seemed beyond just being drunk.



John Oliver turned off most of the lights and asked the few patrons, who had gathered around and were really enjoying this gent’s performance, to leave, so he could close the place down. He told me that this had been going on for over an hour or so, but the guy still wouldn’t quit. I brought up a bar stool and sat next to him; he showed no reaction. I took off his wide brimmed Stetson and wiped his face and neck with the cool damp towel...finally he responded, “God that feels good.” He handed me the guitar, grabbed the damp towel and vigorously scrubbed his face and neck, uttering, “I’m...so sorry...for some reason I just became so lonely...please don’t leave...I’ll be Ok...give me a moment or two to gather my senses...I had a gig at a joint to broadcast over a radio station but the cab driver couldn’t find the place...we were a half hour late, we got into a heated argument, he got pissed at me and dumped me out in the parking lot here.”

“Where do you live, maybe we can help you get home?”

“Oh no! Please, I don’t want to go there...It’s haunted with memories...it’s too quiet, no one to talk to...That’s why I sing, when I sing it’s like I’m

talking to friends. Maybe if, I could hang out here at this place for a while. By the way...just, where am I?"

"This is the Yale Street Ice House." After a moment of thought I offered, "Maybe you should call the station to let them know that you're OK...There's no place to sleep here. We can try calling a motel up on Shephard Drive...or better yet, why don't you come to my house, you can have a bite to eat, take a shower, maybe it'll help you feel better. I'm sure I've got some casuals that should fit, then you can take a nap on our couch."

"You would do that for me...Why? You don't know me from Adam."

"Well...when I first saw you...with those calf-skin boots, the Stetson, guitar, they all showed class. But when I saw 'Custom Made for' in the sweat-band, I knew you were no common drunk, but a man in need of some sort of help. You kinda reminded me of a time when I was in a similar situation. I was trying to sleep it off on a bench on the lower level at the end of Santa Monica pier when, about seven in the morning, this damn fisherman woke me up. He kept yelling about the bites he was getting and jabbering constantly and asking questions and not waiting for any answers. He crowded me over so he could sit down at the end of my bench, forcing me to sit up. I was so pissed at him that I was about to take him on, when he took a thermos out of his knap-sack, poured a cup of hot coffee, and believe it or not, he offered it to me saying, "You look like you need this a lot more than I do."

I was dumbfounded. How could I refuse such a gracious offer? I cradled that hot cup in my freezing hands, sipping, while studying the old guy over the brim of the cup, uttering, "God this is...oh so good...but...why?"

He said. "Two years ago, I was in the same emotional place as you are now. I had a massive heart attack. I survived, with the Lord's help, I haven't touched a drop since and I won't let the past influence my present-day thoughts. My future is now filled with sunshine."

"I never asked his name, nor did I try to make contact with him. I never went back to the pier...But...I have never forgotten that moment." We drove to my house on Courtland Street. It was an old two-story, built up on stacks of brick-block construction, large front porch. Some referred to as a 'Craftsman' having been constructed just after the turn of the



century. I'd constantly been doing repairs and upgrades as money and time would allow.

We gathered in the kitchen around a large round table, coffee was already perking in the electric coffee maker, John Oliver tossed several packages of Danish rolls from the ice house on the table and we dug in.

Madge laid out bath towels and a set of my suntans. Billie Fay put sheets and blanket on the couch, then joined us in the kitchen.

A while later, after his shower, our guest came in with a toothy smile. "I feel like a new man." He sat at the table, spotted his guitar in the corner, grabbed it and began fanning a few soft melodic chords. Offering, "It's like I can't hold a conversation anymore without strumming a few chords. I talk through my music...it's as if the music speaks for me." He played a run on chords that were beautiful, we sat in awe. "I do this for a living...I have a hard time convincing people that I make damn good money doing something that I love to do...I use to write music and songs, sell them directly to people for just enough money to pay the rent. They wound up putting them on records and making a mint." After a lengthy riff of bending and stretching the strings in a bluesy mode, he surprised us by adding, "According to my present contract, I'm not allowed to play my own music 'live', like at a benefit...not even for free...My contract says I can't play anywhere someone might be able to make a recording, unless agreed to by my managers. If I told you my name you probably wouldn't recognize it, but if I rattled off a list of songs I've written, you'd probably call me a liar."

Mac or Buddy were tags frequently used in the service, when addressing a stranger and seemed appropriate here, it seemed to be a good fit. He smiled as if there was an understanding of sorts.

He started picking and plucking, ever so softly, melodies that were now top tunes on the charts. "They're mine, all mine...every single one...According to my contract I'm not allowed to play any of them in public...I know...It was my choice...I did it all for money...I tried Nashville, they've drifted away from the old country-gospel-race music and have gone into heavy productions with back-up choral groups. They took away many of the instruments of country music, the fiddle, slide guitar, stand-up double-bass, mandolin and banjo, then replaced them with full-blown orchestras with those new electric amped-up guitars...they offered me work as a 'studio group back-up picker,' filling in on recording sessions, with singers that I've never heard of before...what really tore me up was when one unknown was belting out one of my tunes I made a comment to the director, his response was 'When the new audio channelizer

gets through with it, it'll sound like it was played before a sold-out crowd.' Which it did."

"Nashville wasn't my kind of music. I received an offer to appear with a group of 'Honky-Tonkers' at the Louisiana Hayride in Shreveport, including many rising stars of Country Music such as Jean Shepard, Bob Wills and song writer Goldie Hill. What a blast! Everyone had their own unique style, Memphis Blues to Southern Gospel. I think Nashville tried to discredit us by calling us 'Outlaws' because some of our lyrics were considered, by them, to be too raunchy. Many radio stations banned some of our songs that were heading, or were already at the top of the charts...now...that I've vented...I'm beginning to feel much more relaxed, maybe I should go in and try to get some shut-eye."

Early the next morning John Oliver and Billie Fay, stirring around getting ready to go down and open the Ice House, woke everyone up, convincing me the need for two bathrooms. Buddy had risen earlier, dressed in my suntans, made coffee and now sat at the table smoking a cigarette with John Oliver while Billie Fay fried up bacon, potatoes and onions. I sat at the table with them, my wife was in bedroom taking care of our daughter.

Buddy offered, "Early mornings activities like this remind me of raising a family. There are times when I wish I could go back...not to start over but to chart a different direction to take. Being under contract has its benefits, but it sure does limit your freedom. The money is good, it's the scheduling...sometimes I feel like a puppet dangling from a string...it's becoming so hard to get up for every performance...I think I need to get away...get lost for a while. I thought I could find tranquility down at Kemah...again, things got too lonely." Buddy then asked, "What are your plans for today?"

"Let's see...I have a Doctor's appointment at 11, shouldn't be more than a half hour and then I'm free after that, why do you ask? Do you need to go or be somewhere?"

"Maybe I could grab a cab... or hopefully talk you into running me down home to Kemah to grab a few things. I feel like the need to escape, go someplace where I can hide out for a while...I don't want to go to a hotel or resort...I guess what I'm trying to say is...I just want to drop out."

"I've felt that urge, on occasion...but my responsibilities kept me in check...I dreamt of having a cabin on the seashore. I've even gone so far as to rent one for a long weekend. What a disappointment, the weather was bad, the surf fishing was awful and the mosquitoes like to have eaten us up."

He scratched his chin and looked at me, as if a thought had just come mind; "Do you think John Oliver could fit me in at the Ice House? You know, as a clean-up guy or handy-man. I'd be happy to play a few short sets if the customers asked, it wouldn't cost Augie a penny and I'd play just for the kitty."

"I don't know, you'd have to ask him. The only problem I see is, can you handle the change? You know, bring yourself down to a regular working folk existence after experiencing the 'good-life'...You'd have to create yourself into a different image."

"Good thinking! When you started calling me 'Buddy' it reminded me of a friend I grew up with, 'Bobby Bell'. Everyone called him Buddy Bell. I could put that name on an old straw cowboy hat I've had for years, grow a beard and dress down, nobody would know me. Will you help...Please?"

"I'll do what I can...you should go talk with John Oliver first. If that works out I'll help you find a place to hole up, then we'll go to your place in Kemah and get your things...how's that for starters?"

"Let's get started. I feel something good is going to come out of this."

John Oliver at first was reluctant to commit. A little push on my behalf persuaded him to go over the routines with Buddy: supplying ice to the few carts and tossing the 24 bottle beer cases around, plus keeping the place clean. I had no idea how much work Johnny had to do. In the end, also found he really needed the help.

We drove down to Buddy's house below Kemah, nice, but not extravagant. I waited in the car while he took in a pillow case containing clothes he was wearing when I met him. He even took his guitar and Stetson in. About twenty minutes later he came out loaded with a cardboard box, duffle bag, a different guitar and wearing a straw cowboy hat. A woman and young boy, on the porch, were saying their goodbyes.

Suddenly, I felt a wave of guilt, "Am I contributing to a family's upheaval? Or maybe a separation?"

Buddy didn't have much to say on the drive back. We found a nice cozy apartment on Heights Boulevard. within walking distance to the Ice-House. That evening he started work.

Maybe it was the warm weather, every tavern in the area was running low on beer. Since the Ice House was a 'cash and carry' distributor, Buddy soon learned how to not listen to the heart wrenching appeals of cutting the prices. Many people were surprised at the cost of deposit on the



empty case. He countered that they should have to pay more for the ice-cold beer.

The next night a couple of young musicians who called themselves ‘The Blackwell Twins’ were having trouble setting up their amps. Buddy helped get them started. They sounded pathetic; no rhythm and lacked tempo. The lead guitar player said their drummer failed to show up. Buddy remembered seeing a double bass in the storage-room and offered to bring it out and play a few sets with them. What a difference! They actually sounded great. He was offering suggestions and they took them in appreciatively. They were so surprised he knew all the words of all their songs. He even did some fancy licks and slaps on the bass, much to the enjoyment of those in the audience.

Augie returned from his vacation and was pleased with how smooth the Ice House ran in his absence, he even approved of hiring Buddy.

The company doctor cleared me to return to work, curtailing my evenings at the Ice-House.

The situation in Korea turned serious. My company was a major manufacture of military hardware. Production was going full bore, overtime, plus weekends, it seemed all I did was sleep and work.

One morning as I came home from work there were fire trucks blocking entrance to my street. I stopped, got out of the car and saw it was my house that had caught fire. Thank God, I saw my wife and daughter along with Billie Fay together at the house next door with piles and bundles of household goods spread out before them. We camped out at a motel on Shepherd Drive until the Fire Inspectors gave their OK for us to move back in.

The owner we were buying the house from, kicked us out, saying the Inspectors found that, “faulty repairs to the electrical system were to blame” and his insurance wouldn’t cover the damages. My swearing an oath that I never touched the area in question fell on deaf ears.

We were lucky to buy a nice house out in Oak Forrest from a Naval Officer who had been recalled to Service. The move also took us out of easy reach of the Ice House. John Oliver and Billie Fay found a nice apartment near his job and kept us up to date on the tavern’s activities.

Several months after the fire we heard that some radio station scouts were out searching for new musical talent. They were seeking this popular blues guitar-picker everyone was raving about at the Ice House.

Afraid his venture into obscurity would be found out, Buddy decided to vanish overnight, without notice to anybody.

Brother-in-law John Oliver...John “Oliver”...he once explained why the need for the addition of ‘Oliver’ after his name. While serving aboard the

aircraft carrier 'USS Savo Island' many men in his section were named John. He elected to be called 'John Oliver' to avoid any confusion and it stuck...Anyway, John Oliver asked if we remembered the 'Blackwell Twins' from the Ice-House. He said they were on their way up the charts and were headlining the Friday-after-mid-night-event, out at the 'Road House' where Shephard Drive and Conroe's East-Tex Highway came together.



The company informed us that they were shutting our shift down over the weekend to beef-up our shop's electrical circuits. I mentioned how good the group was to my graveyard shift buddies and a bunch of us agreed to form a stag party and made plans to meet at the Road House.

The Road House had an interesting background. It was built out in the boonies just after the war to entice truckers to park their rigs, gas-up, shower, eat and spend the night, before making their deliveries into Houston. The place never became successful because the trucking industry became more specialized in specific cargos like grain, produce, tankers and frozen cargo. Each had their own terminals with all the truck driver conveniences necessary on site.

New owners tried to make the place over as an upscale restaurant, in an old-world motif with Ruben-like paintings of well-endowed nude women at leisure, on every wall. The fancy restaurant didn't last long but the paintings were so popular they remained.

They did hit the jack-pot when the place became an afterhours coffee shop serving breakfast '24 hours' with big name country groups appearing on stage. There were reservations only for the twenty inner-circle tables, which took the place of the regular-hour dance floor, with a minimum charge assessed that included breakfast. The local authorities wouldn't permit after-hours dancing,

Our group of eight from the graveyard shift were seated at our table. Coffee was served. On stage was a Piano player pounding out old time raunchy bordello house tunes to the enjoyment of the packed house. Everyone was in good spirits, having come from all the taverns that had just shut down after curfew.

The Blackwell Twins came out on the stage and as they were getting ready to play, one of the twins came to the mike, thanking everyone for showing up and introduced the five members of his band. Then out of nowhere announced, "I see a table with my friends from The Yale Street Ice House, where many of us in the band got our start. Thanks for coming."

We stood and applauded the group along with the rest of the crowd. After six or seven tunes, they high-lighted the piano player as they took their break. He kept the crowd going with old-time gospel "Race Music" with everyone joining in on the choruses.

While on their break the twins mingled amongst the table patrons and were well received. When they approached our table, a neatly trimmed bearded stranger joined with them holding out his hand.

"I'll be damned if it isn't Buddy Bell," I exclaimed, "I thought you were still going incognito. I haven't heard anything of you in months."

"Hello Ron." Then turning to John Oliver, Buddy grabbed his hand. "Thanks for keeping my cover. I owe you guys."

One of the Twins (I could never tell them apart) said, (along with a wink and a smile) "I'd like to introduce our band's manager, Mister Buddy Bell. He really put us through the wringer. He taught us discipline and style. Wait until you see our next set, it's a new sound, I know y'all will love it."

They returned to the stage, the lights dimmed, all was quiet, a soft melodic chord from the pedal steel guitar with a hint of a familiar sounding ballad was hummed by the band members, a moment later soulful hushed tones of a tenor saxophone, playing somewhere in the background, "I Love You So Much It Hurts Me."

The crowd came to their feet applauding the Sax Player when he changed the tempo to 'Honky-Tonk'. The whole ensemble came alive with "Slipping Around". First it was the Twins harmonizing, then the steel guitar and then the Sax. The band, sensing the crowd was ready to join in with them, took off with traditional gospels like 'Michael row the boat ashore' and its 30 choruses that lasted for fifteen minutes and the crowd wanted more.

The Blackwell Twins went on to make it big in the local circuit.

That night was the last I heard of Buddy Bell until several years later. I heard that the man I once called Buddy Bell was re-emerging with great success using his true name of Floyd Tillman. Through the efforts and collaboration from the man known as the original Outlaw and gifted song-smith 'Willy Nelson', along with the recording company 'Columbia Records' together restored the careers of many old-timers, who eventually found their way into Country Music's 'Hall of Fame.'