Both Sides of the Border
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Editor's choice: “Rocky” Rothwell of Cordova, Alaska, was the “he-est” man that I ever met. The first time I noticed him was in a sourdough bar in Ketchikan, Alaska. He had slapped his billfold down on the bar and challenged anybody in that large and densely packed frontier tavern to come up and take it from him—and they could have the first swing! Nobody came. Rocky would drink a water glass of whiskey while he shaved in the morning. Same breed of cat as Old Fat Fullmer!
HELL IS FOR HE-MEN!
by James Ward Lee of Fort Worth

Back in Alabama in the 1930s—back when men were men and women were double breasted—our local hero was Fat Fullmer. Old Fat rode a milky blue Indian Chief Motocycle (Hey, that is the correct spelling for Indian motorcycles), and Fat rode it with style. He had saddlebags with more silver than Roy put on poor Trigger’s saddle or Gene nailed onto Champion’s stirrups. Fat had long leather streamers tied to the handlebar grips, and he wore high boots like an Aggie cheerleader. One time—it must have been 1937 or 1938—Fat rode up in front of the hardware store that his daddy owned and throttled back the Big Indian to a steady gurgle. He leaned the Big Indian over a little and put one of his glorious boots down on the ground and said to the men and boys huddled in front of the hardware store, “Boys, I’ll be in Birmingham in fifteen minutes or I’ll be in hell.”

I thought I would faint at this swagger and strut! This was stuff we saw in the movies and read about in adventure stories. Here was a man defying whatever gods there were in Alabama in 1938. We knew for certain that here was a man. In capital letters, A MAN. Fat had more guts than an army mule. He would ride that “sickle” at 120 miles an hour on those curving mountain roads between Leeds and Birmingham. And fight! Fat would charge hell with a bucket of water. He would fight a buzz saw. And win. Once he got into a fistfight with Jim Ned Grimason at the Hop Rite Inn. Fat took three .32 caliber slugs out of an old 1911 Savage automatic and kept coming. Dr. Clayton dug the bullets out and Fat
made a necklace out of them. For all I know, Fat was buried in that necklace of bullets when he died a few years ago. Jim Ned was in the hospital in Birmingham for six weeks.

But that wasn’t anything compared to this because old Fat, sitting astride that blue Indian, was throwing down his gauntlet before the Lord God Jehovah. He was daring hell, and that was no small thing in Leeds, Alabama, in 1937 or ‘38. If anybody ever deserved to be enshrined in the Hellfire and Damnation Mantown Hall of Fame, it was Fat Fullmer of Leeds, Alabama, USA. Once Fat had rocketed through town on his ‘37 Indian Chief, every other man in Leeds seemed like a pussy to us boys. (Hold it, please. Don’t fret. “Pussy” is not what you might think. It has nothing to do with cats—or willows. It is a technical term, which I will define at the proper time.)

Anyway, Fat Fullmer made it to Birmingham that time. And lots of other times. And he burned up the road for several years on that big, milky blue Indian Chief between Leeds and Pell City, Leeds and Anniston, Leeds and Estaboga, Leeds and Villa Rico, Georgia. And when the war broke out Private Fat Fullmer was sent off to India in the Army Air Corps. As he told the story when he got back from the war in “Inja’s sunny clime,” he and some other hell defiers drank aviation gasoline filtered through light bread. Of course they mixed it with Pet Milk, and that cut the sting.

Hear me one more time: Fat Fullmer was not a pussy. Fat is long dead now, and if all went as he planned it, he is riding his Indian Chief all over hell, which is a lot bigger and more crowded than it was in the Thirties when Fat was riding all over “hell and half of Georgia,” as the old folk saying went. God, we admired Fat Fullmer. But way back then we had no idea that he was a throwback to all the world’s great hell-bound heroes.

Fat was for us what Prometheus was for the ancient Greeks. Remember how Prometheus defied the gods? Against the express orders of the Olympic establishment he brought fire to mankind. For that, he was bound to a rock and big old raptors and such like pecked at his liver, and if that ain’t hell don’t ask me what it is. But
Prometheus sort of won because he is the hero of many Greek poems and plays and Shelley’s famous 12,000-line poem, which nobody reads today. (Bragging note: I once read it aloud—half of it between Denton, Texas, and Ashdown, Arkansas, and half of it on the way back. Top that, English majors!)

And then there is Sisyphus and that rock. He was put in hell and made to roll a boulder about the size of a 1937 Willys Knight up the hill. Just before he got it to the top, it would break loose and roll back down. Poor old Sisyphus down in hell rolling that rock up the hill and having it roll back down and doing it over and over. He is still rolling it as far as I know. According to Albert Camus, a Frenchman noted for irreverence and deep penetration, Sisyphus was the winner. It is true that the gods took round one, but after centuries and centuries Sisyphus is now ahead on existential points.

And everybody knows more about Milton and that whole *Paradise Lost* business than I do, but this is what I remember: Satan and God tangled it up over turf. God won, and Satan was pastured out in his own domain. But still, he was the devil-in-chief and once was heard to remark, “Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven.” He sure didn’t want to be an angel in a heaven full of old ladies, babies, and pussies. And Della Reese and that simpering girl with the fake Irish accent? Nossir, Satan and his boys were not cut out for a soft touch with clouds and golden streets and milk and honey. Those were bad guys—meaner than Saddam Hussein, tougher than Rocky III or Terminator II. (Now, it seems, the Terminator has traded in hell for what he calls Cal-ee-fornia.)

You may not like everything Satan and his band of blackguards did, but you have got to admire their guts. These guys invented Mantown. Imagine how disgusted they were with milk and honey and ambrosia and whatever the hell else they served in heaven. They ate hog meat and red-eye gravy for breakfast and fire and brimstone for supper. You can’t keep a devil from eating pork—or any other unclean animal for that matter. Hey, those devils already have cloven hooves so what’s the big deal?
Way after Satan and his bunch had settled the land where there is no sunshine and all you can see is “darkness visible,” there wasn’t a lot of hell-defying going on up on earth. Some, but not much: Dante and Milton had nearly scared the hell out of everybody. But there was a little hell going on down through the ages: the occasional Black Mass or Witches’ Sabbath or some ugly old girls stirring eyes of newts and other tidbits into a chowder and mumbling “double, double, toil and trouble.”

Shakespeare has a few people willing to defy hell, but not many. One or two do. Horatio, Hamlet’s schoolfellow and another one of those literary guys with no last name, says he will jump in front of Hamlet Sr.’s ghost as it passes over the battlements. He says, “I’ll cross it though it blast me.” Big talk, but not as big as Hamlet Jr.’s a night or so later. Hamlet sees the ghost of his dead father, and when it beckons him to follow, he sets off after it. Horatio and the guards tell him not to go. They say it might be a vile, devilish ghost and might “tempt him toward the flood.” But Hamlet says, “I’ll speak to it though hell itself should gape and bid me hold my peace.” Bold talk for a guy who can’t decide whether “to be or not to be.” And don’t forget one other Shakespearean tough guy: Macbeth. He says to his nemesis: “Lay on, Macduff, and let him be damned who first cries ‘Hold! Enough!’” And he is dead in a few minutes and probably on his way to hell to join all the other bad asses too fierce to even want to be up there with all those nuns and babies and saints and grandmas and Della Reese and little what’shername with the fake Irish accent.

(I might digress for a moment and note that all grandmas, no matter how reprobate they were as girls and young women, turn sanctified in late middle age and all wind up in heaven. I am laying nine to five that Monica Lewinski will wind up with a gray bun at the back of her head making chocolate chip cookies and looking like that old lady in the Hansel and Gretel story. And as Andy Rooney noted, “It seems only yesterday that she was crawling around the White House on her hands and knees.”
But, let me ask you this: Can you imagine The Duke in heaven? No, I think not! The Duke ain’t a pussy. A pussy is a man who does work that won’t get your hands dirty, work a good-sized woman could do. Coal miners are not pussies, nor are lumberjacks and cowboys and railroad engineers. Willie is being ironic when he tells mothers not to let their babies grow up to be cowboys: “Don’t let ‘em pick guitars and drive them old trucks/Make ’em be doctors and lawyers and such.” Doctors and lawyers and preachers and teachers and lots of other folks who don’t get dirty are pussies, but Clint ain’t. Nor was Humphrey Bogart. Nor was Ward Bond or lots of others I could name. Benny Hinn is; Pat Robertson is; Regis is; Joe Lieberman is. And probably Garth, but not Willie and Waylon and the boys. Elvis may have been, but Ernest Tubb definitely was not. I know what I am talking about here. I was once a radar pussy in the Navy, and then I taught school for years and years. Try to imagine Ernest Borgnine or Lee Marvin or the late Jack Elam staring at a radar screen or teaching school.

Okay, here’s how I got off on this whole business of hell as the last hometown of real he-men. I was mowing my grass one day when it was 105 Fahrenheit in Fort Worth, Texas, and I got to studying about Kipling’s poem “Gunga Din.” You know the story: it is set in India where “the ‘eat would make your bloomin’ eye-brows crawl.” I was sweating away and my eyebrows were crawling when I remembered that part at the end when Gunga Din is giving a drink of water to the narrator when he “fell behind the fight with a bullet where [his] breastplate should have been.” He says, the water Gunga gave him “was crawling and it stunk, but of all the drinks I’ve drunk, I’m gratefulllest to the one from Gunga Din.” While the narrator is drinking this disgusting water, some Pakistani or Afghanistani or other “lesser breed without the law,” gets off a lucky shot at the “regimental bhisti Gunga Din.” Lo and behold, “A bullet came and drilled the beggar clean.” Gunga dies, and the narrator says, “So I’ll meet him later on in the place where he is gone, where it’s always double drill and no canteen. He’ll be
squattin’ on the coals, giving drinks to poor damned souls, and I’ll get a swig in hell from Gunga Din.”

Well, that set me thinking. Of course the British soldier expected to go to hell and expected “good old grinnin’ gruntin’ Gunga Din” to go there, too. It is where he-men go; they prefer it to the soft life on Cloud Number Nine with harps twanging away in the background and Della Reese singing “How Great Thou Art” and that little old simpering girl with the fakey accent being all atwitter over some minor sin here on earth. Piddling sins. No serious India sinning like they do out there where “East is East and West is West,” out there “west of Suez where the best is like the worst/Where there aren’t no Ten Commandments and a man can raise a thirst.” So don’t talk to Old Kip about deathbed conversions and last minute confessions and milk-and-water angels that sound like they came from Galway Bay. Real men who live their lives in Mantown expect to end up “where there’s double drill and no canteen.” They want to go there so they can see serious bad asses like Lee Marvin and Lee Van Cleef and Sean Penn.

I know how all those timid people in the Middle Ages—what some call the Middle Evil period—worried about going to hell, and how only a handful of people made pacts with the Devil so they could see Helen of Troy and stuff. It was only after mankind redefined God as Nature way back when Blake was a boy that you got a bunch of he-men challenging the Almighty. Byron was one. He has Manfred and Cain and Don Juan sinning incessantly and daring anybody to do anything about it. And Byron hisownself knew a good sin when he saw it. Dorothy Parker says it succinctly: “Byron walked out with a number of girls.”

The poet Blake lauds the devil as pure energy, and if he is right, then hell must be a place of action and swashbuckling romance. Blake says,

Grown old in love from seven till seven times seven
I oft have wished for hell for ease from heaven.
Whatever that means.

Blake made the Devil respectable and planned the marriage of heaven and hell. But Blake sometimes wanted to have it both ways. He worries about “Dark Satanic Mills” cropping up all over England’s “green and pleasant land.” But, hey, that’s what the Devil does: He builds “dark Satanic mills.” What is supposed to be wrong with that? I am from Birmingham where “dark Satanic mills” fed black and white alike. Percy B. Shelley, whose grandfather was born in Newark, New Jersey, wrote in “Peter Bell” that “Hell is a city much like London—a populous and smoky city.” Just like Birmingham. Or Newark, New Jersey. Or Houston. All the devil was doing was promoting industry and energy and profits for big business. Get real. What about our leading he-man, that celebrated compassionate conservative and Christian Methodist. He ran on “a green and pleasant land” ticket and later saw the wisdom of promoting arsenic in the drinking water and building more “dark Satanic mills.” And if you can’t trust George Jr. I’d like to know who you can trust.

Okay. Let me get back to the story. Time passed. The Middle Evil Period gave way to Enlightenment and other vague periods of life and culture. The Light Brigade happily “rode into the mouth of hell.” Huckleberry Finn ponders turning in Jim to the slave traders, but decides to go against the will of God, who was certainly on the side of slavery. Huck decides to help Jim escape and says, “Well, then I’ll just go to hell.” And remember the shadowy Highwayman in Alfred Noyes’s poem. He comes riding, riding, riding, riding and says, “I’ll come to thee by moonlight though Hell should bar the way.” And old Jesse James from the Stephen Vincent Benet poem:

He swayed through the coaches with horns and a tail,
Lit out with the bullion and the registered mail.

Since everybody seems hell bent on going to the nether regions, you wonder what it will be like. Somebody—it should have been
Noel Coward but probably wasn’t—said, “The best people may be in Heaven but the best company is in Hell.” And Dorothy Parker wrote this little quatrain:

He whose love is given over well  
Shall see fair Helen’s face in Hell,  
But he whose love is thin and wise,  
May view John Knox in Paradise.

I don’t know whether I need to identify John Knox, but he was the heavy hitter of the Scottish Presbyterian Church and had a face like a dried prune. Lots of old-timey Presbyterians looked like John Knox. Albert Bigelow Paine, in his biography of Mark Twain, quotes the writer as describing someone by saying “he looks as out of place as a Presbyterian in hell.” Nobody in hell is as sour as a Puritan divine; those boys down there are drinking and laughing and whooping and hollering. Nobody in the nether world is butting in where he does not belong. Wendell Phillips says, “A Puritan’s idea of hell is a place where everyone has to mind his own business.”

But I keep straying from the subject that I announced. How tough guys admire hell and all. General Sherman said, “War is Hell.” Old Tecumseh Sherman was tough. Just ask Scarlett O’Hara and them. Talk about little tough guys and you have to remember Audie Murphy, who wrote To Hell and Back about being a hero in WWII. Please don’t forget Fat Fullmer. Don’t forget all his heirs who became Hell’s Angels and Banditos and took to wearing Nazi helmets and getting tattoos. Ezra Pound talks about how World War I soldiers walked “eye-deep in hell,” and the late William Owens of Pinhook, Texas, and later Nyack, New York, stole that line for a book of his. Old Rudyard Kipling has an anti-marching poem that says, “I have spent six weeks in hell and certify it is not devils, dark, or anything but boots, boots moving up and down again.” Hell is surely preferable to all that tramping. Let me say it again: Tough guys revel in hell. The Marines pride themselves on
being “Devildogs.” And there was the Devil’s Brigade in the movie about WWII, which a Texas high school teacher taught as WWeleven.

I just checked my old and tattered Video Hound and discovered twenty-three movies on TV with “hell” in the title and fifty-seven with “Devil” stretched across the marquee. You have seen them all—Devil’s Angels about motorcycle gangs; Devil’s Eight about a guy who recruits criminals to hunt down moonshiners; and don’t forget Hell’s Bloody Devils, that features motorcycle gangs, Nazis, and the Las Vegas Mob. And there is Hell’s Angels on Wheels, starring some real Hell’s Angels. Let’s face it; hell is full of guys like Lee Marvin and Steve McQueen and John Wayne and all those people in The Dirty Dozen. Hell is The Wild Bunch with William Holden and Ernest Borgnine. Hell is Hang ’Em High and The Outlaw Josey Wales and Marlon Brando in The Wild Ones and One-Eyed Jacks and The Godfather. Heaven, on the other hand, is Meg Ryan in Sleepless in Seattle and When Harry Met Sally. Heaven is Doris Day in Romance on the High Seas and The Glass Bottom Boat. Heaven is anything with that cute little Katy, Texas, girl Renee Zellweger.

If you don’t believe me about the popularity of hell nowadays, you could look it up. Google has 4,777,000 sites with “hell” in the title. Not all of them extol its manliness; some are downright scary and right out of Dante’s Inferno. Check out AmazonDotCom (That’s all one word.) and you will find 1672 books with “hell” in the title. I am here to say that hell is very popular nowadays.

Way back, Odysseus, after making a trip to his travel consultant, Achilles, in hell, says he would prefer to be a servant in a rich man’s house than a king in hell, but not old Lucifer. He was clear: “To reign is worth ambition though in hell/Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.” So here we are in modern times extolling the virtues of hell and keeping the devil firmly in our minds. The Duke University totemic symbol is the Blue Devil, and New Jersey has a soccer team called “The Devils,” and we all know how potent Red Devil Lye is and how good deviled eggs and deviled ham are.
There is even a delectable salsa from Telephone, Texas, called “Hell on the Red.” So when old Phil Sheridan said, “If I owned Hell and Texas, I’d rent out Texas and live in Hell,” he was not saying that Texas was bad, just that it was second best.

Here is my last word on the subject: Hell is a spaghetti western, and Heaven is a chick-flick.
TALKING DOG FOR SALE

[Kent Biffle of the *Dallas Morning News* was going to do a story for TFS about smart hound dog tales. This was about as far as he got.]

In Tennessee, a guy sees a sign in front of a house: “Talking Dog for Sale.” He rings the bell and the owner tells him the dog is in the backyard. The guy goes into the backyard and sees a black mutt just sitting there.

“You talk?” he asks.

“Yep,” the mutt replies.

“So, what’s your story?”

The mutt looks up and says, “Well, I discovered this gift pretty young and I wanted to help the government, so I told the CIA about my gift, and in no time they had me jetting from country to country, sitting in rooms with spies and world leaders, because no one figured a dog would be eavesdropping. I was one of their most valuable spies eight years running. The jetting around really tired me out, and I knew I wasn’t getting any younger and I wanted to settle down. So I signed up for a job at the airport to do some undercover security work, mostly wandering near suspicious characters and listening in. I uncovered some incredible dealings there and was awarded a batch of medals. Had a wife, a mess of puppies, and now I’m just retired.”

The guy is amazed. He goes back in and asks the owner what he wants for the dog.

The owner says, “Ten dollars.”

The guy says, “This dog is amazing. Why on earth are you selling him so cheap?”

The owner replies, “He’s such a liar. He didn’t do any of that stuff.”