

# DAMN YANKEES

By Gail E. Moss

MossWords.com

YANKS: What the Brits called American G. I.'s during World War II.

YANKEES: What Mid-Westerners call people from New England and The Bronx.

DAMN YANKEES: Anybody from outside of Tennessee that's clogging up traffic, taking up all the housing and changing Cookeville, be it for better or worse.

Not to mention <sup>1</sup> Snowbirds and <sup>2</sup> Half-backs.

When my husband and I first invaded Cookeville I heard some whispered names, but they were entirely inaccurate as we live here fulltime, and we are more like three-quarters back. They didn't know that like a lot of folks around here, we don't want Cookeville to change too much either. We want it to stay the kind of town where you can leave your car window open because it's August and you've got a black interior, then come back in an hour to find your Aldi's quarter is still in the cupholder.

We chose to move to Cookeville for many reasons: The great rating of the hospital and all the medical services available here (at our age we have more doctors than friends). Tennessee Tech and the amazing rates for seniors to take classes is a huge plus. The parks, the activities, the local businesses and yes, the growth. Cookeville has added so many services and shops that we don't have to go to Nashville unless we want to. And when we want to it's only a hop, skip, and a jump to one of the most famous, and fun cities in the U.S. And the best part of the expanding waistline of our town is the growing diversity that is part of the American heritage.

But sometimes, I'll admit it, after 5 years of living here and waiting way longer to turn left on Highway 111 than we used to, I think; Cookeville's full. Shut the gates and keep out all those California, Ohio, New York, Florida, et al, Yankees!

Did you just call me a hypocrite? Well bless your heart.

I left Columbus, Ohio with my husband when I was 37 1/2 years old. We spent 12 years in Florida, one year in Seattle, back to Florida, four years in LA, back to Florida again, a short stint in D.C. for my husband, because I refused to go, back to Florida one last time, before we retired to Cookeville in 2019. There was nothing I wanted more than to live in a place where we knew our neighbors and had some land so I could adopt a couple of llamas and raise free-range chickens that laid beautiful brown eggs on my back porch every morning.

Then came Covid! I met my favorite neighbor, Betty, because she mailed a handwritten letter from her house across the street, apologizing that she and her husband Bill had not been over to properly welcome us. So, I drove down my driveway and up her's and we hollered at each other from 6 feet apart for the next year. During this time at home, I learned that living on 10.5 acres

---

<sup>1</sup> People who go south only for the winter.

<sup>2</sup> People who moved to Florida, missed having 4 seasons but did not want to move all the way back up North and landed in Tennessee.

outside of town means, yes, I could have chickens, but I had best not name them because the fox, hawks, and stray dogs like chicken too, fried or not. As for the llama, my husband said maybe my next husband would feed them because he ain't going to do it. I knew he was serious because he never says ain't. We made it through Covid and eventually started heading back into town. And so did everybody else!

Now, not everyone crowding into all the new apartments in Cookeville moved here for wildlife. So why are they here? And not all of the local people are excited about having so many new places to buy coffee when gas station brew has always got the job done in the past. Are the newcomers trying to make Cookeville like the places they came from? Why do some Cookeville natives love the growth while others feel like they are getting pushed out, priced out, and cultured out of their hometown? I decided to talk to some folks and find out. And I started with the Mayors.

Mayor Randy Porter has been the Putnam County Mayor, of which Cookeville is the County seat, since 2014, and has been working in and serving Putnam County since 1980, during which time he was instrumental in bringing enhanced 911 to our community.

I started my inquiries to these fine elected officials with the one burning question everyone wants to know: are y'all team Ralph's or team Big O's. No comment!

"I've talked to a lot of folks that have moved here," Mayor Porter told me in his office one afternoon, "Folks say they wanted to get back to rural America." The Mayor cited an example of a family from Los Angeles with six kids that were afraid to raise children there.

On the hometown feel of Putnam County, "We are a very inviting community and love folks coming here." Mayor Porter told me that he has not seen a lot of people trying to change our area, most are trying to get away from something. "They don't like what's going on where they live, so they are coming here because they like what we have to offer."

Mayor Porter also addressed the growth issue with me. He explained that along with Mayor Wheaton and other officials, they are working on "planned growth," whereby we don't lose that small town feel but also give people what they need and want. Local folks requests to bring back fireworks happened when former Cookeville Mayor Ricky Shelton was in office, and Mayor Porter continues to add additional activities like festivals. Local businesses and restaurants are the Mayor's favorite things. There were a record number of ribbon cuttings last year, and that means jobs, too. Look for historic pictures of Putnam County on Mayor Porter's Facebook page.

Mayor Laurin Wheaton has been the mayor of Cookeville since 2022, serving the previous four years as Vice-Mayor. She is also a nurse practitioner as community health and wellness is of the utmost importance to her.

Mayor Wheaton, who moved to Cookeville with her husband, a born and raised local, fell in love with the town and never wanted to leave. I asked her if Cookeville is still a small town or are we

becoming fancy? “I want the best of both worlds” she told me. When she served on the city council, she saw all the opportunity and hometown family atmosphere that is here, and now as Mayor, she wants us to have all the big town resources such as jobs but wants to protect all the local businesses and personalities. “It’s a real fine line for me to walk to have both of those” she continues, “some people don’t like change and too much can be a bad thing.” With the Mayor’s other job as a nurse practitioner, she sees that change is a constant, so she welcomes it but believes that we must also be prepared for it, “I never want to lose the Cookeville that people have come to know and love.”

Mayor Wheaton respects town people’s fears that we are growing and changing too much “I want to represent all citizens of Cookeville and take that in as well as the perspective that with growth comes greater opportunities” she shared with me, “to that end, Cookeville can be very selective of what jobs come in and make sure that they are higher paying jobs with companies that will invest in Cookeville.”

A lot of people, especially local people, feel that they are getting priced out and pushed out of housing due to the shortage, and Mayor Wheaton is aware of this. “We do need more affordable housing for people coming out of college, people starting a family, and people starting a business.” She says that is something the city government is planning. Strategic growth is looking ahead, but there will be growing pains that they are addressing.

I think folks here are a little friendlier than some other places, and so does Mayor Wheaton. “Cookeville has all the southern charm that I’m used to,” the Mayor smiled, “This is probably as far north as you’re gonna get me.” Hailing from Mississippi, I’m pretty sure our Mayor isn’t any kind of Yankee, telling me, “I’m a true Southern Girl.”

Unlike Mayors Wheaton and Porter, I am a recovering Yankee. I want to be a part of Cookeville till they take me out in a pine box. I want to immerse myself in all the best parts of making this place our forever home. So, when I speak, I often fall into my mishmash accent accumulated from all the places we have lived, but I love best the way Tennessee sounds. So, one morning when I turned on the radio, while waiting to turn left, I heard the voice of a southern belle that to me made the local weather report brighten up like moonlight hitting a mason jar of shine in the bed of a pickup truck.

Sheila Scruggs is Co-host of Good Morning Cookeville with Jason and Sheila on News Talk 107.7 and 1400 The Hub and an Economic Development Planner with Upper Cumberland Development District. The sound of her Tennessee lilt made me want to call her Miss Sheila and ask her for her biscuit recipe.

I asked Miss Sheila with full sincerity and desire to emulate the aural pleasure of a slow conversation mixed with a tall, sweet tea, do you think born and raised Cookevillians mistake my attempts to speak with such pure pulchritude that is a true southern accent, as mockery?

“I don’t think so at all.” Miss Shiela assured me, “Most people know the difference when someone loves the dialect and when they are making fun of it. It’s a compliment when someone WANTS to sound like you. I, myself, love other southern accents. I think Georgia has some of the prettiest and sweetest sounding people in the south.....besides Tennessee, of course!”

Born and raised in Lynchburg, Shiela and her husband Tim moved to Cookeville in 1991. I asked her about the growth and change in town. “The only thing that is bothersome is the traffic flow. That would be a problem with growth anywhere. I believe our elected officials are trying to work toward a better solution for that, but it just takes time.” She also told me, “When my husband and I moved to Cookeville in the early 90’s, there weren’t many restaurants here at all. In fact, Interstate drive wasn’t full of food places or many stores then at all. It’s grown so much since our first days here. We love it. It’s still small enough for it to have the hometown feel without being as congested as Nashville (that’s where my husband is originally from). We are both really happy with the progress in Cookeville and don’t have to travel much outside of the Upper Cumberland when we need something.”

Having the ear of the local folks, I asked Shiela if she has heard much talk from her listeners regarding what some feel is a tendency of “Damn Yankees” to look down on folks who have always lived here and whose families built this town?

“I personally haven’t called anyone that.” She clarified, “I’ve met so many people from all walks of life, not only in my profession of radio, but I also work for the Upper Cumberland Development District as one of their Economic Development Planners for the Empower program. If someone chooses to live in our area, it’s usually because they like our way of life and WANT to be a part of it. A few months ago, Jason Grider and I interviewed a couple from Romania on our show Good Morning Cookeville. The couple lives in Monterey and love this area very much. They stated everyone has been helpful and supportive to them. If someone says a negative statement to me about the people of our area, I try to educate them and explain how my experience has been and how there will be good and bad wherever you go. As a Tennessean and southerner, there are always misconceptions about us. How am I going to show them they’re wrong by shutting them down? Education is key. As we say in the south, Kill ‘em with kindness.”

Like me, Shiela loves this town “My husband and I left here in 1998 thinking we’d have a bigger and better opportunity in Missouri. We were only there a year and came back to Cookeville because we missed the atmosphere and the people here. It’s our home now. There’s nowhere like it. It has our heart.”

I agree with Shiela, there is no place like Cookeville, and a big part of Cookeville and one of the reasons we moved here is Tennessee Tech. We didn’t want to live in some retirement community, we wanted to be in a college town where we could be around smart young people and keep our minds sharp. And we stink at golf. My husband Scott is a double major at Tech in History and English and plans to go on to teach. His idea of retirement is working toward a third

career in life... that does not include llamas. However, if he could, he would adopt all the dogs. We currently have four.

The best part of his going back to school was the first year when I could tell people I was married to a Freshman. Wink! Now that he's a senior, Senior, the best part of Tech is all the wonderful people we have befriended, professors and students alike.

Dr. Laura Smith and Dr. Allen Driggers are History Professors at Tennessee Tech. They make history fun. Doctor Laura, as I like to call her at school, (I call her friend at dinner dates), is also the head of the History Club and along with Dr. Allen's help, they coordinate group activities for us history nerds. As a couple like us that are not Cookeville natives, I wanted their take on life in Putnam County.

I started with Dr. Allen, asking if he considers himself a southerner? He told me, "I was born in the South. I started life in Gastonia, NC (which is near the Charlotte metro area), and then my family moved to Durham. Durham-Raleigh-Chapel Hill is a large metro area in North Carolina, nicknamed the Research Triangle because of all the colleges and graduates schools that are in the area. There are around 2 million people there now. I think because I grew up in larger metro areas, the identification of southern never really was useful to me, nor was really useful to define who I am. My research in the history of science and medicine often disputes regional boundaries for intellectual ideas."

Then I asked Dr. Laura about her students, and she replied, "I've had mostly really positive experiences with students at Tech. It feels like most of the students are locals themselves. I'm not sure whether they are welcoming to others outside of the classroom, but they've seemed friendly at school. One interesting thing I notice is that they frequently mention loving being from here or that they consider this area the best place in the world. That's really interesting to me as a nomad who's lived in a lot of places." Dr. Laura is happy to be here, "There are a lot of good things about a town this size, and again, I love my job and the students!"

And how does Dr. Allen, feel about the area? "I really enjoy the peacefulness and restfulness that the nineteenth-century-founded city of Sparta provides for me; I really love our house there. But Sparta never feels "southern," it feels to me more like a mountain community." I asked him how he thinks Cookeville feels toward Tech's students? "There are a lot of people in Cookeville who are kind and welcoming of students there. Many people in the community are excited for people from different areas coming in and making Cookeville a metropolitan city. However, there is occasional resistance and people use their horns far too much when driving."

Myself, having been to Rockefeller Center at Christmas, I'm thinking the horns might be the New Yorkers, but I can't say for sure.

We bought our beloved Cookeville home with help from Tyler Wilson of Skender-Newton Reality. Born and raised in Cookeville and a graduate of Tech, I asked Tyler for His thoughts. He told me he believes, "Most people moving from out of state are coming to escape high taxes

and want a way of life that is more community oriented.” He went on to say, “Being a graduate of Tennessee Tech University in the early 2000s, I’ve seen the college grow tremendously. I think a lot of students come to TTU and end up falling in love with Cookeville and staying here to begin their careers.” So, I asked Tyler about housing as he is a Realtor. “The housing market is cooling because interest rates are rising. That has caused demand to slow. Now we are seeing supply catching up to demand. Homes are starting to sit on the market longer than they did over the past several years.”

Then I snuck in the big question, and Tyler confessed, “Definitely team Ralph’s. Nothing beats a cake donut.”

After talking with all these great people, I know Cookeville isn’t going to stay a small “small town,” but if we all work at it, we can keep Cookeville a community that still has the qualities that brought us all here. For me, Cookeville is the hometown I have been looking for since I left my hometown 25 years ago.

Appreciate ya.

Oh, me? I’m team...No comment!