

# ROBESONIAA

· FRIENDS OF THE ·

Winter 2019

Volume 39 Issue 1

Friends of the Robesonia Furnace, Inc. PO Box 162 • Robesonia, PA 19551-1230

## THOSE EARLY YEARS Part II

*Burt D Webber Jr.*

When I was about 12 or 14, I was running a trapline up a small valley, "Little Creek" not far from where we lived. Up ahead of me I saw this big bird sitting high up on a top branch of an old dead tree. I thought it was a big old chicken hawk or turkey buzzard. I pulled up on it with my .22cal rifle and brought it down with one shot that went through the neck. Although wild turkeys were then very rare in our area of Pa. and I had actually never seen one in real life before, now up close I realized what it was. I quickly hid it in some thick brush and thought, oh boy, if my dad would find out about this, shooting a turkey out of season he's probably going to kill me. When I got home I told my mom about it and went off to a near by friends house. Within the hour up drives my dad. He says come on, get in the car and lets go. Immediately, he asks me about the incident and I explain what happened. In the trunk of the car he had his fishing hip boots and a burlap bag. He says, whats done is done, we're not waisting that bird of its in fact what I think it is. As I recall, t turned out to be about a 12lb. turkey which was well prepared for our next Sunday dinner.

While growing up at the Furnace, camping was a regular occurrence during the Spring and Summer and sometimes even in the Winter. My brother, a couple of the Garrett brothers and one or two friends from town had a camp site they made and called Hobo Heaven. Why that name I never knew. To go to this site one walked up the road (south) from our house and about a hundred to two hundred feet from the top of the hill there was the dirt road that went on up to Gilbert Snyder's field. About a hundred feet up that road, on the right side was a trail that branched off up and into the woods. That led to an old charcoal burning flat. That's where the camp was. We younger kids were never allowed to go there probably because "these big kids" would smoke cigarettes and cigars and maybe even swig a beer or two heisted out of my dad's cellar den refrigerator.

Some years later when I began camping it was usually with the two younger Garrett brothers, Richard and Johnny, and sometimes their cousin Philip who lived in the Wernersville area. To get to that first camp location that we made, one walked up to the Snyder's field and continued on a narrow weedy road that ran along the right side of the field with the woods bordering on the right...

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## Those Early Years

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*Burt D Webber jr*

At the end of the field the road continued through about a hundred yards of woods on both sides and then came into what we called the second Long Field. On the far end of that field, on the left side where the woods began again, this is where we had the first camp site. With recollection of that site, three occurrences come to mind but not of the camp site itself but what happened on the return home. With camping gear packed into the knapsack on my back and carrying my .22 cal. Marlin lever action, I slightly detoured off the route home to pick some blackberries in some thick patch along the edge of the field. As I proceeded to pick the berries, I looked down and not three feet away was a large Copperhead snake. I immediately stepped back and quickly shot it. Its location within this patch of berries was with the intent to ambush any bird coming within range while eating the berries. The second incident I remember was on our return from the campsite on a Saturday morning. We stopped for a few minutes in the little clearing where Gilbert Snyder had his yellow storage trailer in which he kept various things such as bags of planting seeds, fertilizers, farming tools, etc. While standing there in the ankle high dry grass, I felt something going across my boot. Looking down, I couldn't believe my eyes. Yes of course, another large Copperhead actually shedding its skin. Very tense, I remained motionless until it was a few feet clear of me when I drew up my 22 Marlin and killed it. The third and most memorable experience was when Richard Garrett, Johnny Garrett and I were at the camp site when at about two o'clock in the morning I had a severe asthma attack and had no medication with me. In those days the bulb-squeeze inhalant had to be kept in a refrigerator. This meant I had to make the emergency trip home which was a walk of about one and a half miles in the dark, illuminating the way with a flashlight. Johnny agreed to stay at the camp while Richard took me home, accompanied by his dog Lucky. As we came in approach to the little clearing where Snyder had his yellow utility trailer, perhaps 50 to 100 yards away we distinctly heard wood chopping. As we came into the little clearing, Richard cast the flashlight beam in the direction of the chopping sounds coming from the woods just behind the trailer. What we saw was frightening beyond words. At this point the dog Lucky was like bristled and barking loudly. There stood a long hair, bearded man in tattered clothes with a long handle ax in hand staring at us with a wild look on his face. At that moment we broke into a run down the little road from the clearing. I remember this was difficult for me as I had difficulty breathing because of the asthma. When we arrived on the back patio of the house, I pounded on the back door, and moments later my mother answered and was followed shortly thereafter by my dad. First thing, I took my medicine and immediately had relief. Both Richard and I nervously described our experience which it was evident my parents found hard to believe but we both saw it. We hadn't imagined it. For the rest of the night, Richard slept in the basement den but as soon as day light came we returned on the same and only route back to the camp. We went to the area behind the trailer and there was the evidence. A tree of about four to six inches in diameter had been felled with an axe and the wood chips were scattered about the ground. What we saw was in fact real but what was it that we saw?

Who in their right mind is in the woods in the middle of the night cutting down a tree in total darkness. Was it even human? When we reached camp, Johnny was already up with a breakfast fire going. When we told him about our experience, he was very upset over the fact that we had left him alone at the camp.

I make no exaggeration to the following story which I continue to believe has a direct bearing to the in-the-middle-of-the-night tree chopper experience. Years later, following that incident, I use to do Fox trapping sets up in that general area of Snyder's "first field". During this period in time, the field was no longer cultivated and had been planted with rows of young pine trees. On more than one occasion I'd chance upon one of these trees along the road that had been felled with an axe for no obvious reason...

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*Burt D Webber Jr*

I'd immediately have a strange forbidding feeling upon seeing this and felt certain it had a relationship to that early experience. One day I was talking about this to Rodney, one of the older Garrett brothers and he said while walking along the field road small game hunting, he too saw a young pine tree cut down and lying there which he thought to be strange.

Its a bit difficult to explain the exact lay of the land but if one goes north-northeast from the Snyder trailer, it brings you out at what was then known as the old reservoir. In my youth, one could still see and walk across the cement dam breast. The dam itself had filled in with sediment and was only about a foot deep. More like just a marshy area. My mother use to tell me that as a girl living in Robesonia, she and many others use to walk up there to go swimming. As a matter of fact, I have a photo of her and others standing on the dam breast. If one follows the trail that leads off to the east from this location, it brings you out to what was once the Garrett House. This old reservoir location brings to mind anther strange incident.

My dad had inspired in me a real interest in hunting plowed fields for Indian arrowheads. As a boy he found many in the Webber owned fields south of the town of Rehrersburg. For me as a boy, I was always excited when he'd say, well those fields (one in particular) have been plowed recently, lets go look for arrowheads. This interest continued and I'd do the same thing when Gilbert Snyder plowed the long field above the house where I'd find some on occasion. I remember when John Garrett, David was Thompson and I were sitting on the incline along the trail that skirted the reservoir when David, idly poking in the ground with a stick, exposed a perfect arrowhead. We could hardly believe it. Warren Watson who was school principal and my math teacher years later was also interested in Indian folklore and hunting arrowheads. He was kind enough to show me his framed collection he had displayed in his house. On that visit he told me that at the opposite end of the old reservoir dam, previously mentioned, about one hundred feet back into the woods, there was supposed to be an Indian grave mound but he had never did any excavation. He also said that in the immediate area there supposedly once stood a colonial period log cabin. I was absolutely fascinated by this story and couldn't wait to investigate it.

It didn't take me long to find the area that Mr. Watson was talking about. What I did find odd was that having found what I believed to be the site, there was a slight depression in the ground were it might had appeared like this was excavated long before. I did not find anything that would have indicated the existence of a now long gone cabin like a concentration of mountain stones that would have once been used in the construction of a fireplace. Shortly following this first visit, I returned to the site with a rake and shovel on a late afternoon after school. I began clearing the area and had just begun to dig in the ground depression when a strong overwhelming feeling came over me. It was a sense of someone else's presence, someone watching your every move. I stopped digging and just stood there in complete silence, listening and watching all around me. As the sun began to sink lower in the west, on a low ridge roughly to the south about a hundred yards distance, I just knew someone was there watching. As I focused on the ridge tree line, I was sure I saw movement although it remained near stationary. I called out, hey, who's there a few times but no reply came. I then felt extremely venerable as I had no firearm with me. I left the tools where they were and hastily retreated on the trail leading to Snyder's long field and down the short mountain lane to our house. My mother was at home, my father wasn't, so I told her about the experience and she listened with interest, but had no opinion as to what had happened. The following day after school, I returned to the site to retrieve the tools but this time I was armed with my .22 rifle. I still remember the eerie feeling I had when I got there, thus I left as quickly as I could. (A similar experience would occur later on in another location).

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# Friends of the Robesonia Furnace 2019 Annual Dinner



Ozgood's Restaurant  
Tuesday March 19, 2019

**5:30 - 6:30** Cash Bar  
**6:30 - 7:15** Dinner  
**7:15** Speaker –BURT WEBBER  
**8:00** - BUSINESS MEETING

- . PRESIDENT'S REPORT
- . TREASURER'S REPORT

## OFFICERS:

**PRESIDENT : ABBY WERTZ**  
**VICE PRESIDENT : RANDY GARTNER**  
**TREASURER : BARBARA ORTH**  
**SECRETARY : FRANCES YOH**  
**SECRETARY ELECT: DONNA KUHN**

**HAVE AN INTEREST IN SERVING OR DONATING  
AN ARTIFACT TO THE MUSEUM? WOULD YOU  
LIKE TO SCHEDULE A TOUR FOR YOUR GROUP?**

**PLEASE CALL 484.955.7381**

**NEWSLETTER: KEITH RENTSCHLER**  
**BUILDING & GROUNDS: CALVIN YOH**  
**MUSEUM & TOURS: RANDY GARTNER**

## Registration Form

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

_____ Roast Turkey w Gravy	<b>\$21.00</b>
_____ Chicken Cordon Bleu	<b>\$23.00</b>
_____ Black Diamond Steak	<b>\$26.00</b>

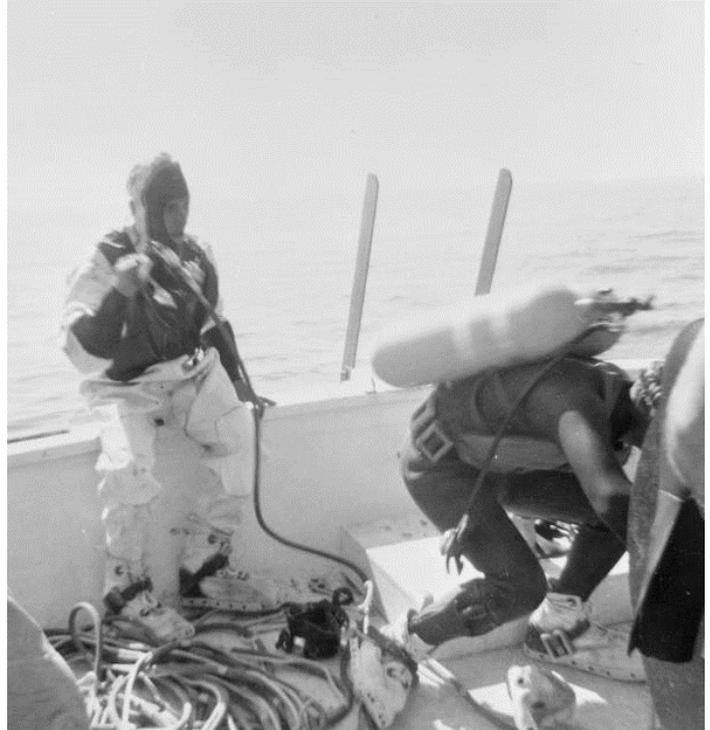
Please Check Off Choice

**All meals include Choice of House or Caesar Salad, Vegetable du Jour, Roasted Rosemary Potatoes,  
Fresh Baked Rolls, Fountain Soda, Coffee, Tea, and Dessert [ Cheesecake ].**

**REGISTRATION DEADLINE TUESDAY, MARCH 12, 2019**

*Please make checks payable and send along with form to:*

*Friends of the Robesonia Furnace, PO Box 162, Robesonia, PA 19551*



Robesonian native Burt Webber Jr suiting up for a dive, Circa March 1967 off the coast of Florida (top left image circa 1961)

***Sign Up A Friend!*** How about sharing with a friend or sending them a gift membership?

## *A note from the President...*

### ***Greetings and Happy 2019!***

The pavilion is up and was used for last years craft show. This year we hope to install the electric. We thank The Janssen Foundation for their grants that have helped us accomplish so much.

The Friends Summer Show will be held August 24th, from 9am—3pm. We always appreciate the great turnout and support for our local talented artisans.

*Abby Wertz*

## **Did You Know?**

**That you can schedule a walking tour of the Furnace grounds for your private group? It's true!**

**Call our very own Randy Gartner to schedule. Take advantage of his wealth of knowledge on the Furnace site and operations—  
484.955.7381**

**Membership Renewal Form**  
**(Check your mailing label for your current date of membership)**

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Yearly Amount Level		One Time Amount Level	
\$ 10.00 ____ Individual	\$ 25.00 ____ Contributing	\$ 100.00 ____ Life Member	
\$ 20.00 ____ Family	\$ 50.00 ____ Sponsor		

**\*Memberships for 2019 expires Dec. 31, 2019**      **\*All donations are tax deductible**

Please make checks payable and send along with Membership Form to Friends of the Robesonia Furnace, P.O. Box 162 Robesonia PA 19551-0162



Photo Credit– Nick Moyer  
<https://hiveminer.com/User/NickMoyer>

The “Falls” at the Robesonia Furnace. Originally created to harness the Furnace Creeks flowing waters to power furnace operations including the grist mill, via a spill flow wheel. The retaining wall was significantly higher, creating a deep pool and larger “falls”. This is where the beginnings of Burt Webber Jr’s love for water exploration began. Burt went on to be regarded as one of the worlds greatest divers, reaching international acclaim in 1978 when he discovered the sunken Spanish Galleon ship, the Concepcion, which sank in 1641.

## Those Early Years

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*Burt D Webber Jr*

Continuing on the subject of camping, this proved to be a significant part of my childhood and early teenage years. For a number of given reasons, the first campsite I had was abandoned. I found a new one up along the "Big Creek" valley not far off of the water company road. One had to cross the Furnace Creek (heading east) and follow a little brook stream about two hundred feet up a little hollow that led to an old charcoal flat. A "charcoal flat" is where wood was stacked, dried and burned into charcoal for fueling the near by iron furnace. This proved to be an ideal camp location, especially with the little brook located but fifty to a hundred feet away. The water was fresh and cold. We could put drink containers and even wrapped and sealed foods like bacon into a little holding pool and all would remain cold. The Garrett brothers and I proceeded to build a sturdy A-frame structure with a tar paper roof. Although during rain storms, there would be some water dripping in here and there, overall, it was pretty dry. Inside we had dug a hole large enough to insert a five gallon round tin container, the lid-top coming flush with the ground level. In this was stored canned goods, matches and misc. items. This is something my dad told me he had done in an A-frame structure he had built as a youth on the outside of Rehrersburg. This is how I got the idea. About six feet in front of the entrance of our A-frame shelter was constructed a stone circular fireplace for cooking and for warmth during the winter months. All in all, it was a very comfortable camp site that we used frequently.

It was on a late Friday afternoon when Richard & Johnny Garrett and I hiked into our camp and got all our things organized; food, sleeping bags, kerosene lanterns, etc. We already had a good store of cut and stacked dry wood there so we soon made a fire and prepared our supper. That was usually canned Dinty-Moore Beef Stew and buttered bread. On this particular camp out there was one change out of the normal routine. Richard and Johnny's brother Roger was a star basketball payer on the Robesonia high school team. On that night he was playing in a championship game and they didn't want to miss it. It was only about a two mile walk so they left together and would come back after the game - in the dark with their flashlight. When they left they took their rifles and lights along which they intended to drop off at their house on the way and then pick them up on their return. This left me at the camp alone but I really didn't mind. Besides, I had my .22 revolver and extra ammunition with me. I don't know why I didn't take my rifle this time.

I was sitting comfortably on the log just in front of the fire as daylight was beginning to fade. Suddenly I heard a strange distinct male laughter coming from some distance to my left, over and above the brook on the top of the ridge line that defined the hollow. I looked in that direction but could not see anything. The laughing ceased for a couple of minutes and then began again coming from the same location. I then began to grow concerned as I knew it was not my imagination and the daylight was now fading. All kinds of thoughts raced through my mind and I came to the conclusion that it had to be Richard and Johnny who didn't go to the game after all. I thought they must have circled around and positioned themselves atop of that ridge intending to scare the daylights out of me. I called out loudly saying ok, real funny but I know its you so come on down. A short silence and then the laughter again. I had enough of this, so I called out loudly that I've got a gun and if it or they didn't reply right now I was going to fire-shots in that direction. Silence and then laughter once again. As I could still see the trees lining the ridge line back dropped by the nearly diminished light, I fired three shots deliberately high so as not to actually hit anyone. I could hear the bullets snap cracking through limbs of trees. I thought now - immediately I'd hear a response of stop, stop shooting, you could have killed us. A very eerie silence and then the laughter again. I just could not believe it. I believe I had the hairs standing up on the back of my neck. I quickly reloaded the three shots I had fired and my mind raced as I tried to make a decision. Either go into and to the very back of the A-frame, revolver at ready, and wait for the probable appearance of who or what this was or make a run for it while there was still a wee bit of natural light remaining. I chose to run.

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## Those Early Years

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*Burt D Webber Jr*

When I arrived home it was completely dark. I called the Garrett house and inquired about Richard and Johnny. Mrs. Garrett told me they weren't at home. They had gone to watch the basketball game at the high school gym. So now I knew it definitely wasn't them playing such a bizarre trick. Not long after my call, both of them arrived home and called me. I immediately walked to their house which was but five minutes away and I explained in detail what I had experienced. Now the decision. Should we return tonight or wait until the morning. Gathering up flashlights and guns, we decided to return. Upon arriving, the blazing fire I had going when I made my hasty departure was now but a bed of dimly glowing ambers. We revived the fire immediately and tensely made a search of the entire camp area with firearms at the ready. No one was to be found and all seemed in order until Richard made a startling observation. His camp axe which he had put inside the A-frame shelter was now deeply embedded in the end of the sit-on log in front of the fire. It had been embedded with such force that it took real effort to dislodge it. This evidence that someone was there had far more impact on me than it did on them.

First thing we decided to do was to fire off some shots with both the .22 rifles and the 12ga. shotgun we had. This was to let anyone out there lurking now we were armed and ready. Thinking about it now, that concept didn't have very much impact when earlier I had been alone and fired off some shots with my .22 cal. revolver. We kept the fire blazing high right on through the night as well as taking guard duty shifts while the other two slept. With great relief, morning finally came. A somewhat similar incident took place a few years later when a small forest fire broke out in the woods above what was then called Sporting Hill which was just off the east side of the Furnace Circle. There was a lot of commotion with the firetruck and other vehicles arriving there so we went to see what it was all about. When we got there I remember one of the towns men actually insinuating that maybe we had sometime to do with this fire starting this, not realizing we had just arrived. When the fire in the woods was put out, the fire chief asked if we would be willing to stay over night (since we all lived near by) and keep a check on things as there were a lot of smoldering stumps, logs, etc. Sounded like an important overnight adventure for us so we all walked home first and told our parents what was going on. When we came back with consent having been given by our parents, we brought along our .22 rifles for, just in case, defense. The fire company left us with a couple of Indian tanks, (hand pump fire extinguishers) a cooler with sandwiches and sodas and a couple of powerful flashlights. After everyone left, there was a strange quietness. We kept a small controlled fire going for light and we made ourselves comfortable as we could and periodically walked the perimeter to check that no fires had restarted. In the wee hours before morning light something strange happened. In the darkness about a hundred feet away, not at ground level but at approximately a man's height, we could distinctly see the glow of the tip of a cigarette at the moment when one draws on it. We shown our flashlights in that direction but there was nothing there. Minutes later, the same thing happened again but in a different location. This happened several times more but each time we shown the flashlight beams, there was nothing. We waited things out and finally, slowly the dawn came. We felt sure we were being watched throughout the night but why couldn't we see anything when we turned the flashlights on? In our minds we believed that was the arsonist, a obviously crazy person who had remained lurking in the dark.

Now, having recalled these mysterious stories, it should be mentioned that at a distance of two and a half to three miles from the locations where these things occurred, was and is the Wernersville State Mental Institution Hospital. It was not uncommon to have a patient escape now and then. This factor could be an explanation.

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## Those Early Years

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*Burt D Webber Jr*

When I was about twelve years old I started a coaster racer club, more commonly known as “soapbox racers”. These were down hill coasters. Our headquarters and racer fabrication site was on the second floor of our barn on the left hand side when entering. By this time the two horses were gone so there was no longer hay stored on that side as it use to be. We would scavenge for any kind of wheels we could find such as baby carriage wheels, cart wheels, old wheelbarrow wheels, you name it. With the wheels, when we could we’d take the axels. Next step was to scrounge up usable wooden boards and two by fours. These racers were basically just a board frame. The main body board that the driver sat on was about 12” or 14” wide, 1” thick and about 4 ft. long. Across the rear of the board was fastened a 3 to 4 ft. long 2” by 4”. To this was fastened the rear axels and wheels. The reason for this width was to prevent the racer from turning over when turning sharply. The front 2” by 4” was only about 2 ft. long to which the front axels and wheels were fastened. The front of the main body board had a narrower 8” wide by 2 ft. long extension board to which the front 2” by 4” was mounted with a center bolt so that it could be turned left or right. Foot pegs were mounted on each side of the main board as well as stops so that when activating a full, tight turn the front wheels couldn’t jam against the main body board. The steering was done by left side, right side pull ropes. There was no shell body on these racers. What I have described was of my design. Following shortly, I improved on different features. Instead of attaching the wheel axels with horse shoe nails (which would eventually loosen) I drilled the holes and used “U” bolts. As my dad had an open charge account at Brown’s Hardware Store in town, I got new ball bearing hub wheels instead of the sleeve bearing hub wheels normally available. I also improved the steering method so I could turn in a shorter radius. I had also designed a rear braking system but it wasn’t too efficient.

All the test runs were done on the moderate sloped hill that ran down along side of our house yard and across the falls bridge. We’d hold the real races coming down from the top of “Sporting Hill” down near the old furnace ruins. This was a fairly steep run of about an eighth to a quarter of a mile from top to bottom which ended in a “T” where you had to turn extreme left or right. For kids our age, this was a real challenge run. Need I say, I was usually the winner. The ball bearing wheels had a lot to do with it. My club racing sidekicks were Richard Merkey (who lived on the hill) and Anthony Tranquillo who lived in one of the row houses across from the cinder bank. When we’d race on a Saturday mornings, I remember there were one or two kids that would come up from town with their own version of coaster racers. They had fun but they never won. Although there was never a lot of traffic on this road, this was the real danger. For that reason I always had one kid at the top and one at the bottom with alert flags both for us and to caution any automobile coming. (editors note: Burt’s memoirs concluded here with a note “*To be Continued*”. Be sure to see and hear Burt at the Friends Dinner on Tues, Mar 19 at Ozgoods.



Childhood home of Burt Webber Jr, at the “Falls”, corner of S Church and Furnace St. Current residence of Friends contributor Tracy Rice and her family.

**Friends of the Robesonia Furnace**  
**P.O. Box 162**  
**Robesonia, PA 19551-0162**

In this issue, we continue the fond recollections of Robesonia native Burt Webber Jr, best known for best known for his 1978 discovery and salvage of the *Concepcion*, a Spanish galleon ship that sank off the coast of the Dominican Republic in 1641.

Attend the Friends Annual Dinner at Ozgoods on Tues, Mar 19th, and hear Burt Webber Jr speak on this and so much more. Details inside!

