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## Dover storyteller uses life experiences as fodder for true-tale whoppers

By JEANNIE STONE Contributing Writer

Before the digital age, even before the invasion of television, folks led a good life, believe it or not. So said Wetzel "The Storyteller" LaGrone of Dover, who has always treasured his childhood and memories of what others might call hard knocks.

Recently, he has taken his stories to the public. After his first performance on the critically acclaimed international radio show Tales From the South, at the Starving Artist Cafe in North Little Rock, he has the itch to keep telling his true tales.

LaGrone, 77, laments the demise of the storytelling tradition so evident during his formative years.

"The first Christmas I can remember is when I was 4 1/2 years old," he said. "We lived in the Deadwood, Texas, community. My paternal grandparents lived about a half mile from us, and my maternal grandparents another half mile beyond them. I was surrounded by family."

LaGrone's roots are so deep in that community that his great-great-grandfather, born in 1781, was the first, along with his wife, to be buried in the local cemetery.

"That's before Texas became a republic in 1836," LaGrone said. "Seriously, my wife (Betty) told me she's going to bury me in Deadwood so she doesn't break the line."

A strong sense of place and time suits LaGrone, who is known to dispense his thoughts on modern culture freely.

"The sad truth of the matter is that storytelling isn't a part of our lives now because nobody visits anymore," he said. "We used to go visit aunts and uncles and such, but you don't see people calling up to see if they can visit nowadays."

LaGrone points to the one bastion of yarn-spinning remaining in Southern culture.

"The oral tradition I see surviving in our culture lives on at duck, fishing and deer camps," he said. "I can tell all kinds of short stories there. That's how people do at camp. We could tell stories all day if we wanted, and nobody would leave. Nobody considers themselves a storyteller there, though. We're just visiting."

Although LaGrone considers those campers "some of the best storytellers in the world," he admits the stories themselves are not long.

"Short stories can really teach strong lessons, like parables in the Bible," he said.

LaGrone enjoys sharing the life lessons he's learned, many from his father.

"My daddy worked the gas lines, and he was a great leader. We had red clay where I grew up, and when it rained, that clay got slick," LaGrone said. "One day, a car slid on that clay and got stuck. A farmer came with a team of mules to pull him out, but when the farmer would pop the reins, one mule would react before the other could, so they weren't working as a team, and they certainly weren't getting anywhere. My dad asked if he could try. He walked in front of the mules and very calmly started to lead them out, and that's how my daddy lived his life."

LaGrone has written down many of his memories in the hopes of passing on some of the wisdom he's learned from life and his father, such as sports advice and how to outrun a horse.

As a child, LaGrone moved up in the pecking order of the playground because of his athletic ability and the stubbornness he showed to stand his ground.

“When you were a little older, grades in the classroom made a little difference but not much,” he added. “The pecking order was still mostly physical. I didn’t realize it then, but I tried to live by my daddy’s creed that you never start a fight, but you never run from one, either.”

Referring to himself as a “naïve country boy,” LaGrone admits to having some unusual encounters, and that line of thought launched him into telling the story he performed on the radio.

The story is about hitchhiking, which was an everyday reality for LaGrone, who played every kind of ball there was.

“My hitchhiking began when the junior high principal helped me get my class schedule changed so I could practice and stay after school to play on the high school baseball team,” LaGrone said.

“It was 1949. I was 15 and hitchhiking my way to Carthage to play an American Legion baseball game when this guy picked me up. After I got in the car and we took off, he told me he was going to Rusk to commit himself to the insane asylum. Now that got my attention quick. Now here I am with this guy who’s telling me he’s insane as his car swerves all over the road. He would drive real fast, then real slow, and always on the wrong side of the road until we’d meet a car.

Every now and then he’d look at me and ask, ‘Do you think I’m crazy?’ He’d say, ‘Everybody says I am.’ Now, how do you answer that? I’m not sure if the guy was really crazy or was just trying to scare me. I thought about telling him to stop and let me out, but I had already told him I was going to Carthage, and I didn’t know what he’d do if I told him something different. As soon as we got to the edge of town, I said, ‘This is where I need to get out,’ and when he stopped, I bailed out and took a long sigh of relief as he drove off.”

LaGrone’s performance, which can be accessed at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6M326ro775E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6M326ro775E), had the audience in proverbial stitches.

LaGrone said he rues the absence of play in some children’s lives.

“Parents seem to start the kids so early in organized sports, like T-ball. When I was a kid, we didn’t need to get nine people on a team before we could play. We didn’t even have a lot of radio, and we didn’t have electricity. We kids either went out to play or we listened to the old folks telling stories on the porch.”

Kids, and people in general, have so many distractions, he continued.

“We didn’t have all these playthings, either, and we couldn’t have afforded them anyway,” he said. “We played kick the can and hide-and-seek. We entertained ourselves. Kids now have so much stuff, like Xboxes and computers, but then they complain they have nothing to do.”

LaGrone’s mother and father were avid readers.

“The name Wetzel came from a Zane Grey book,” he said.

Although LaGrone had never performed before his radio debut, he had gained speaking experience as a member of Toastmasters International, a club dedicated to improving one’s elocution, as well as developing one’s ability to form a speech of substance.

Retired from the Arkansas Department of Human Services as chief fiscal officer for the Division of Aging and Adult Services, he had plenty of opportunities to hone his emerging speaking skills.

Additionally, in the wake of his retirement, LaGrone has served six years as a board member for the West Central Arkansas Agency of Aging, is a four-term member of the Silver Haired Legislature and a committee co-chairman, and serves on the advisory committee to revise the state’s aging plan.

The death of his first wife left LaGrone with two small children. That’s when he turned to writing poetry.

“Ideas would pop into my mind, and I would write them down,” he said. “Then in 1996, I had a stroke, and I realized I wasn’t immortal anymore.”

His wife, Betty, has witnessed the transformation of her husband, who is now a bit more comfortable in front of a live audience.

“Oh, he’s having the time of his life. This is a whole other side of him coming out, and he just loves it,” she said.

LaGrone laughed.

“My wife doesn’t believe me when I say I go to the local coffee shop every Saturday morning to exercise my mind. It really is true. I have to think fast to be able to tell an absolutely truthful story that will match some of the windy lies the other guys tell. Perhaps there is a little gossip going on, but we also solve some serious worldwide problems,” he said.

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