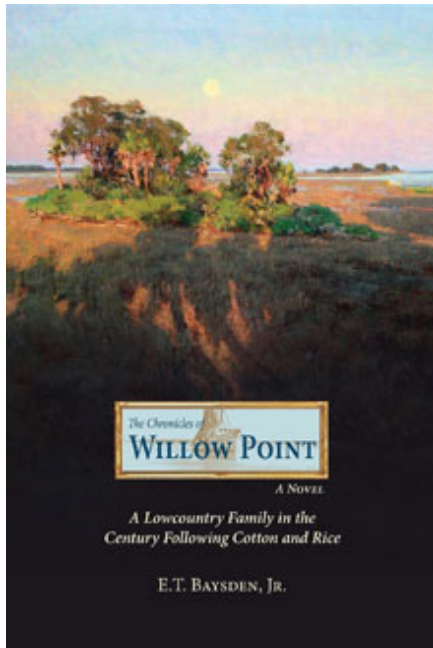


Another Willow Point Story

Written by E.T. Baysden

Tuesday, 13 October 2020 09:44 - Last Updated Wednesday, 14 October 2020 04:51



*"This is a work of fiction. However, with a single exception (and as outrageous as some of them may sound) all the incidents described here really happened"... Thus begins the Author's Note introducing The Chronicles of Willow Point, a new novel by Beaufort's **E.T. Baysden**. The following is an excerpt from that novel...*

From Chapter 28: Beaufort, South Carolina

The white supremacist organization known as the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan was founded in Pulaski Tennessee in 1866 by former Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Forrest had grown wealthy as a slave trader before the war and organized and funded his own cavalry regiment of volunteers. He was among the most enigmatic characters of the Civil War, known both for brutal cruelty (his forces had executed dozens of unarmed black prisoners at Fort Pillow) and for remarkable feats of heroism and courage. The Klan had disappeared and re-emerged at least three times in the first half of the twentieth century, but its mission had remained basically the same: opposition (often violent) to minorities and immigrants. Even Catholics were targeted for a time.

As Mack and Billy were having the house special hamburger steaks at Harry's Café on Bay Street, Klan members were gathering outside in preparation for their march from Carteret to Charles and up to the post office, where speeches would be made. Seeing a parade forming, Wilson Lane Bourke wandered over to join in. Known to all as Tootie Fruity, a name he apparently gave himself, he was a much-loved institution in the little town. A slightly

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feeble-minded black man of indeterminate age, he could be seen almost any morning sweeping the sidewalk in front of the shops along the main street. This was a job he had essentially created, and if the merchants didn't pay him (and some did) they took care of him in dozens of other ways.

But Tootie's primary occupation was leading parades. Whether for the annual Christmas pageant or the Water Festival each summer, Tootie was always out front, dressed in white shirt and trousers and a captain's hat, carrying a little baton with which he kept time like a drum major. When Tootie was no longer able to walk the parade route, the town created a special little float for him to ride in and lead the parade. On it was a sign that read "Tootie Fruity – A Beaufort Icon!"

But Tootie was in fine walking form as the KKK prepared to march that day, their robes and hoods hiding their identities and giving the whole group an aura of menace and fear.

And then, as soon as the march began, there was Tootie, right out front, leading the whole group down the street. The Klansmen looked at each other in total confusion and stunned disbelief. "*What the hell?!*" one could almost hear them saying beneath their hoods. And so the Klan indeed marched down Bay Street that day, led by a feeble-minded black man, waving his arms.

But that was not the only incongruent event at the parade that day. Henry Soden, proprietor of Henry's Shoe Repair and the town's only cobbler, was watching the march go by at the corner of Scott Street and Bay. As was his wont, he had already had a few drinks that day. And since he worked on the shoes of almost everyone in Beaufort, he had no problem identifying, for all to hear, almost every robed figure that went by. "There's Frank Trent, always wearing them Wolverine boots . . . there goes Mike Ransom, brown tassel loafers . . . Melvin Goodman, suede Hushpuppies . . . Johnny Tyler and them old black wingtips. When he comes in I have to fix his shoes while he waits, 'cause they're the only pair he's got!"

Driving back to Willow Point late in the day, Mack wondered where all of this was heading. Black people had been a part of his life for so long he just couldn't see the situation at a distance. The challenge for him – just as it had been for the Captain – was to avoid thinking of them, and treating them, like children. But since many of them had been seemingly happy with this for decades, a change of attitudes would be needed for black and white alike. *We could all learn something from the people on St.*

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Helena,
he thought.



*E.T. Baysden has spent most of the last half century in the SC Lowcountry, where he served as chief marketing officer for Sea Pines Resort, Callawassie Island, Spring Island, Oldfield Club, and Palmetto Bluff. He is also the author of *The Rock Jaw Ladies Club: A Memoir of the Other Vietnam*. He is a fly fisherman, an Episcopalian, and an avid Tar Heels fan. To learn more about his novels, visit www.baysdenbooks.com*