It All Happened in

Reufro Valley
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It All Happened in
Reelfoot Valley

PETE STAMPER

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To John, Kirbit, and Gefus, my three imaginary playmates who shared my childhood days in rural Butler county. Clarence Williams, James Milton, and Clifton Sisk, real honest-to-goodness pals who ran beside me all the way to manhood. To John Lair, Red Foley, and Don Warden who gave a young entertainer all the help he could use. To Glenn Pennington, Ralph Gabbard, and Warren Rosenthal for the icing on my cake, a layer higher than I ever thought it would be.

Just a little over a year ago when I set out on this journey "back down this road a piece," I became aware of just how many of the players who had had a part in Renfro Valley's early years had made their final curtain call. I remember counting my blessings there was still one I could count on to either confirm or reject my memory on a number of events.

Old Joe Clark who had celebrated his 50th anniversary in the Renfro Valley spotlight not only remembered how and why this or that took place the way it did, he was the whole story on many occasions in what I have to say.

Old Joe was just two weeks away from beginning his 52nd season when he took his final bow on the stage of life. I have left each story about my friend as it was originally written and approved by him and in the present tense since he is in our minds at each time we step on stage. I am proud to say they brought him a chuckle or two.

Thanks, Joe, for the memories.
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A Note from Dolly Parton

Pete Stamper is to me and many others one of the funniest and most original comedians ever in our business. I love his delivery; he kinda sneaks up on you. His humor is smart and funny, and that's a great combination. Pete is not only unique as a comedian but as a human being as well. I traveled with Pete long enough to pick him apart if there had been anything to pick at. I think he is a perfect gentleman—respectful, reserved, quiet—and you would think he is anything but a comedian except for his funny twist on everything. He reminds me a great deal of Will Rogers. I love him.

Renfro Valley has meant so much to every person in country music, especially older folks like me. We have all played there or played with people who have, and we think of it as legend.
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Renfro Valley, Kentucky, is located in Rockcastle County on the edge of the Daniel Boone National Forest, near the intersection of Interstate 75 and U.S. 25. It is sixty miles south of Lexington, Kentucky, and 120 miles north of Knoxville, Tennessee. At first, Renfro was merely the name of a creek that trickled through the forests and meadows near Mt. Vernon, Kentucky, and was known only to the few mountain folks who called the area home. Today, Renfro Valley is an entertainment complex whose nucleus is country music in all its various forms and related genres. As a mecca for fans of country music, it rivals Branson, Missouri, and Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry. From a 1930s Saturday night combination radio broadcast and stage show, the musical menu at Renfro Valley has evolved into a smorgasbord of shows and mini-concerts featuring old-time country music, country gospel, modern country, bluegrass, and country comedy. Headliner concerts featuring Nashville’s top country artists and special events such as fiddler’s festivals and all-night gospel sings supplement the roster of regular Renfro Valley entertainers and scheduled events. Between shows, visitors pass the time strolling the streets of a Victorian-style village featuring craft shops and restaurants, visiting a log schoolhouse, resting body and soul in a little country church, or learning about the history of Renfro Valley at the village museum.

The originator of the Renfro Valley entertainment center was the valley’s most widely known native son, John Lair. Born July 1, 1894, in Rockcastle County, Lair grew up in the community that he later named. The culture that helped shape the young Lair included a mix-
ture of both sacred and secular components. On Sundays there were church services to attend where the congregation sang hymns and songs of a serious nature, a community leader imparted words of wisdom and advice to the young folks, and a circuit-riding preacher occasionally dropped by to treat the worshipers to a real sermon. During the week, entertainment was to be found at such community functions as play-parties, square dances, pie suppers, and singing bees. John Lair absorbed his culture like a sponge, and as an adult he drew on his store of youthful impressions to build one of the country's greatest monuments to nostalgia, Renfro Valley.

Lair was deeply interested in music, especially the music that had been created or appropriated by the masses and handed down from generation to generation. Ancient ballads such as "Barbara Allen" and "The Gypsy's Warning" as well as traditional fiddle tunes such as "Soldier's Joy" and "Devil's Dream" held as much interest for him as spinning wheels, flintlock rifles, and other physical artifacts with stories to tell of America's olden days.

In the thirties, Lair worked with a radio program, the National Barn Dance, on Chicago's WLS. In Burridge D. Butler, owner of WLS, Lair found a sympathetic and kindred soul. Butler, like Lair, was fascinated with the past, was a champion of the farmer and the agrarian way of life, and was constantly promoting traditional family values among those who worked for him, those who listened to his radio station, and those who read his newspaper. One of the first things Lair did was go back home to Renfro Valley and round up local talent that he put on the air as performers on the National Barn Dance and other WLS programs. Using a programming format that would become his trademark, he presented these singers and musicians to their radio audiences in mountaineer sketches, which, as station officials once noted, "touched so many hearts."

Though the WLS National Barn Dance was designed to simulate an old-fashioned rural hoe-down, Lair wanted to give radio listeners the real thing. His dream was to be able to broadcast a barn dance from a real barn using local musicians, and he wanted that barn to be in Renfro Valley. The next step along the way came in 1937 when he acquired a sponsor willing to pay for a Saturday night radio show called the Renfro Valley Barn Dance. The show premiered on October 9, 1937, and was staged at the Cincinnati Music Hall and broadcast over WLW. It included crooner Red Foley; fiddler/comedian Slim Miller; Millie and Dolly Good, known as the Girls of the
Lair was a dreamer, a historian, a philosopher, and a reveler in the past. But he was stuck with the twentieth century. Realizing that he could not reverse the forward movement of time, he set about the task of staying its course. After years of dreaming, planning, and scheming, his labors bore fruit, and his anachronistic Renfro Valley was finally built in Rockcastle County in 1939. It became known as "the valley where time stands still."

On November 4, 1939, radio listeners across the country who were tuned to Cincinnati's WLW heard the announcer say, "Friends, the long-awaited moment has arrived, and we are now about to take you down to Renfro Valley. . . . Since three o'clock this afternoon the hill folks have been coming on foot, on horseback, and in big farm wagons. At least three hayride parties are reported on the way and reservations have been made from five states, so plenty of strangers and 'furriners' will be on hand for the opening tonight. And now it's time to join them."

Following the theme song, "We're Gonna Have a Big Time Tonight," John Lair took over the microphone, greeting listeners with "Howdy, folks! Welcome to the Renfro Valley Barn Dance coming to you direct from a big barn in Renfro Valley, Kentucky—the first and only barn dance on the air presented by the actual residents of an actual community."

In his search for talent, Lair's greatest discovery was probably Red Foley, who later became a country music superstar. Other young men and women from Kentucky entered the country music field at about the same time that Foley joined the WLS roster of entertainers. Unlike Foley, for the most part their fame was short-lived and geographically limited. Lair, no doubt, deserves considerable credit for Foley's success. For, although Lair had great respect for the raw talent he uncovered in the hills and hollows of the South, he knew what had to be done to make this talent palatable. He knew just how much polish it took to turn a real mountaineer into an accomplished performer without destroying his or her rustic appeal.

Lair was a stickler for authenticity. To add further to his program's real-life ambiance he convinced station management to allow him to broadcast the shows before live audiences. When Lair's performers took the stage in Renfro Valley, their costumes reflected the dress of the rural southern mountaineer. In 1940 Lair hired a male trio called the Range Riders, who had been singing western songs and dressing
in cowboy outfits. Before he let them go on stage at Renfro Valley, he changed their name to the Mountain Rangers, dressed them in plaid shirts, gabardine trousers, and flat-heeled boots, and required them to develop a repertoire of old-time southern hill country songs. "There are no cowboys in Renfro Valley," he said, and for years, during a time when western music was highly popular in movies, on juke boxes, and on the radio, none of his performers were allowed to invoke the cowboy or cowgirl image.⁷

Lair periodically took to the hinterlands of the South in search of folk ballads, play-party songs, and fiddle tunes indigenous to the region. He questioned old-timers about the history and sources of the songs that he would take back for his performers to sing on his radio programs. He attended folk festivals and established professional relationships with folk song scholars and promoters such as George Pullen Jackson and Bascome Lamar Lunsford.⁸

Lair not only collected folk songs; he also sought out old sheet music and song books, sources of long forgotten compositions that found new life on his programs. Among his sources of published music were WLS and Prairie Farmer listeners and readers, who responded generously to his pleas for old songs.⁹ By mid-1935, thanks in large measure to Lair's efforts, the WLS music library boasted holdings of more than twelve thousand pieces of printed music.¹⁰

Thus it was that John Lair established for himself a reputation as a man who could turn talented mountaineers into accomplished radio artists and a man who had a vast knowledge and understanding of folk music and folklore of the South. When potential sponsors wanted to put their money behind a rural-oriented radio program that had the ring of authenticity, Lair was the man to see. His Saturday night barn dances, community play-parties, and Sunday morning gatherings were heard across the country on network radio. His approach to radio programming was copied by other broadcast entrepreneurs, and aspiring artists of the airwaves far from the hills of Kentucky sang the songs that he had rescued from oblivion.

In 1940, Ralph W. Griffin described the new barn and a typical Saturday night at Renfro Valley. He wrote:

Except for its size the barn is just about what one would expect to see upon any reasonably prosperous farm. Inside it is floored, equipped with its capacity of ordinary collapsible seats and a peanut roost, while across the front end there is a large and well-
lighted stage. The lighting effects come from unique electric lanterns and orthodox foot-lights. Ears of corn are strung upon the walls and baled hay is piled about helter-skelter, among pieces of harness and farm machinery. The performers come and go at will. They sit or lounge about upon the bales of hay and upon the floor. Quite often they are to be seen down in the audience, chatting with friends. There is much ad-libbing and impromptu clowning, not to mention a lot of good-natured horseplay. There is no curtain across the front of the stage and once the show starts it is practically continuous. It opens... with a thirty-minute broadcast, the program for which is prearranged, well executed and the technique of which is familiar to most radio listeners. One may wander about the parking lot which surrounds the barn and there see car license plates representing possibly fifteen different states, and just any number of Kentucky counties. Swanky limousines may be seen parked alongside ancient farm trucks [and] large busses vie with farm wagons for favorable parking space. Inside the barn, overalls are seated alongside expensive tailored suits, while gingham dresses rub shoulders with Paris gowns.

When listeners to the Barn Dance radio broadcasts were invited to write in for a free picture of the cast, the station received fifty-three thousand requests within the next four days. The number of requests eventually reached 253,000. On some Saturday nights more than ten thousand people sought admission to the barn, and frequently it was necessary to keep the show going all night long to accommodate all who had bought tickets. Noting the popularity of the barn dance, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), through the facilities of WHAS in Louisville, picked up the broadcast for airing over its network of radio stations. Other radio programs from Renfro Valley followed.

With the coming of television, the Renfro Valley Barn Dance broadcasts, like most live radio shows, were canceled. But people kept coming to Renfro Valley, and to the present day the show has continued to provide visitors with entertainment as a stage production. The one Renfro Valley program that remained on radio was the Renfro Valley Gatherin'. This weekly show, performed before a Sunday morning audience at Renfro Valley, is taped for distribution to a syndicate of more than 160 radio stations serving an area from New York to Wyoming and from Wisconsin to Florida.

During most of its first fifty years of existence, the Renfro Valley Barn Dance and related enterprises were owned and operated by John Lair or his descendants. Following Lair's death in 1985, the Renfro
Foreword

Valley entertainment complex was sold, and its current owner is Lexington, Kentucky, businessman, Warren W. Rosenthal.

What one finds at Renfro Valley today is a tasteful blend of the old and new, both in physical structures and entertainment fare. Alongside the original barn is a new auditorium equipped with state-of-the-art seating and audio and video capabilities. On the stage of the old barn, bales of hay have been replaced by a drum stand and amplifiers for electrified instruments. The current slate of entertainers on the Renfro Valley Barn Dance, Sunday Morning Gatherin', and the Valley's other shows represents a wide variety of stylists ranging from comedians to gospel quartets. Typical shows feature old-time parlor ballads, novelty songs, bluegrass tunes, and country fare, both classic and modern. The latest hits from Nashville's hottest songwriters are intermingled with songs that John Lair, decades ago, brought back from his trips to the surrounding countryside or culled from stacks of ancient sheet music.

So there you have a gist of the substance of Renfro Valley—its origin, a glimpse of its history, its physical features, and some of the human activity that animates it. In the pages that follow, long-time Renfro Valley entertainer Pete Stamper acquaints you with the soul of Renfro Valley. Through his warm and often humorous behind-the-scenes anecdotes and human interest stories about the entertainers, you will gain rare insight into the workings of one of America's oldest country music entertainment venues.

References

4. Renfro Valley Keepsake, 1940, unpaginated.
6. Ibid.

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10. Ibid., August 17, 1935, p. 11.
11. Ralph W. Griffin, *So This is Renfro Valley: A Brief History* (Mt. Vernon, Kentucky, 1940), unpaginated.
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A number of times during the past five or six years friends of mine have said to me, “You know, you should write a book about Renfro Valley.” Not once do I remember ever saying I wouldn’t know where to start because I always thought that the start would be the easiest part of all. You can’t spend forty-seven years in a place like Renfro Valley without hearing or reading about its beginning a few hundred times. I’ve searched my mind to recall every corner, nook, and cranny of this little old valley that holds a memory or two or three or four or more for me . . . the swimmin’ hole in Renfro Creek where I once frolicked with the Callaway sisters; the two-story log cabin where I got my first and almost my last taste of moonshine; the hamburger steak dinners I ate daily at the Renfro Valley Lodge; the ghostly footsteps that haunt the Museum Building; the peck, peck, pecking sounds from the typewriter coming from inside Mr. Lair’s office; the National Anthem playing over the speaker in the breezeway of the radio station as WRVK left the air at sundown; the sounds of the frogs along Renfro Creek where I once frolicked with the Callaway sisters; the chirpin’ of the baby birds in the Old Barn loft as we recorded The Sunday Morning Gatherin’; the ring of Emory Martin’s five-string banjo on a Saturday night as he picked, “Bill Bailey Won’t You Please Come Home”; the burst of laughter Slim Miller brought on when he would show off his new shoes; the good feeling I get when I hear someone I have never met call my name as I walk down the Village street; a wave from Dan, Dan the Candyman on my early morning trips to the post office in Renfro Village; the Valley Drive-In where we went to watch