

Mountaineer (And Junior) Wrote The News From The Home Front

By GARY STEWART
Editor of the Herald

Their pen names were "The Old Mountaineer" and "The Old Mountaineer Junior." Their real names were John H. Floyd and James A. Houser. Their purpose as writers was to report the news from Kings Mountain's Margrace and Pauline Mills to employees who were serving their country during World War II.

For the hundreds of servicemen pulling duty in the U.S. and overseas, opening a letter from the Mountaineers was better than opening a box of cracker jacks and finding the prize.

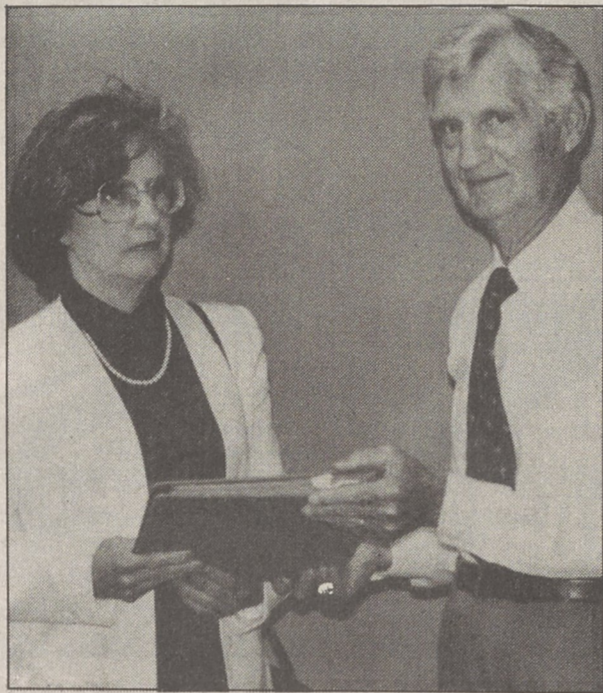
The duo wrote about all of the happenings in the plants and also told news from around town, such as political happenings and the successes of the local high school ball teams. Each letter included the names of local boys who had volunteered or been drafted since the last letter. Almost every letter updated the soldiers on the amount of money raised through war bonds to support the U.S. and one letter included the picture of a Boeing "Flying Fortress" which was named the City of Kings Mountain, N.C., and purchased with bonds bought by the citizens. The Margrace Credit Union stood in second place among all the Credit Unions in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and the District of Columbia in the amount of war bonds sold and students at Kings Mountain High School sold over \$15,000 worth.

The decision to write the servicemen came from the late C.E. Neisler Jr., President of Neisler Mills, in 1942 and the responsibility was given to Floyd. Floyd, now deceased, went into the service later that year and Houser took over. After Houser went into the service, Floyd, who had been discharged, took over the letter-writing chores again.

From July 1942 through the end of the war in 1945, the two men wrote over 3,000 letters. In addition, they sent cigarettes, Christmas boxes, pictures and other items to the servicemen. Co-workers in the mill offices helped them with typing and mailing.

Houser, who now lives in Searcy, Arkansas, kept the letters and many of the servicemen's replies in a book which he plans to give to Mauney Memorial Library after it is laminated or preserved in plastic sleeves. He also received patches from servicemen from all over the world, which were kept in the vault at the Margrace Mill for several years. Houser said he left the patches at the mill when he left the Margrace to take a job with Cannon Mills.

In his opening letter to servicemen on July 30, 1942, Floyd explained the purpose of his writing and said he was adopting the name "Old Mountaineer" so people wouldn't know who he was. "It is going to be possible



ROSE TURNER, JAMES HOUSER

for me to be praised or kicked, as the occasion may require, without anyone getting mad," he wrote.

Some of the letters and replies were juicy, and all were factual. Just about everyone from Kings Mountain serving in the War was mentioned at one time or another. Many of the servicemen would write back and tell about seeing other men from Kings Mountain from time to time. All of the employees who went into the service had their names engraved on concrete Victory Honor Rolls which were mounted outside the Margrace and Pauline plants. All of the local servicemen had their names printed on a big board in front of the Presbyterian Church which was financed by the Lions Club. It had over 1,100 names on it.

After the first couple of letters, the Old Mountaineer began to get answers from the servicemen and would include excerpts in following letters. Some of the early excerpts included:

Pvt. Frank H. Crowder - "It's hotter in Camp Chaffee, Ark. than the dye house ever could be."

Charles E. Spearman - "How are all the boys around the Pauline Store?"

Pfc. Vernon L. Smith - "I got more kick out of reading that letter than I do the KM Herald."

Pvt. Paul E. Murray - "If any of the girls would like to write anyone, well, let that be me."

Pvt. Raymond G. Hartsoe - "Was glad to get the news for I have not been getting my Herald every week due to the fact that I have been moving around."

Some other good excerpts through the years:

Pvt. Hugh W. Yates - "I was digging a fox hole one day--shoveling like a dog. A lieutenant came up to me and said, 'don't throw that dirt around like that. I said, 'what shall I do with it Sir?' and he said, 'dig another hole and bury it.'"

Pfc. John A. Royster, in North Africa - "Even with my very broad influence and connections, I don't think I'll be able to obtain one of Rommel's tanks or famous 88 MM guns for the town square. At the rate the guns and tanks are being wrecked by these 'nasty' American boys, there ain't going to be any left to bring back."

Pvt. William Earl Wells - "I can't tell you where I am, but everything is O.K. Just having to work hard as hell. Nothing to drink and no girls to go out with."

Allyre Gallant - "I want to thank you for the picture of the girls you sent me. When a fellow sees something like that he has an idea what he is fighting for."

John B. Randall - "Say, how about one of those pictures you spoke of. I would like to have something to look at besides a bunch of sailors. I know I am married, but even at that, I can look, especially since I have the Atlantic between the boss and myself."

Luther P. Ware on the U.S.S. Baltimore - "We have these rats on the run and now they are going to stay on the run."

Pfc. John A. Royster, in North Africa - "As for the Purple Heart, well, it might be a badge of Courage to you, but to us guys that got it, it's just a gentle reminder that we didn't duck fast enough."

S/Sgt. W.J. Fulkerson - "An Arab saw one of my sheets the other day and said, 'Special Business, me give you 1,000 francs for the sheet.'"

Sgt. Karl S. Sawyer - "After 5 weeks of all a guy could want in England I landed in Africa."

Lt. Clarence Ray Black - "I'm in New Guinea. Incidentally, our group has shot down more enemy ships than any other group in the Air Force. We have nearly 400 definitives and a couple of hundred more probables."

Pvt. George Wilson - "Your last letter found me somewhere in Italy, knee deep in mud."

Pfc. Vernon L. Smith, in Italy - "I will sure hate to leave this place. Tell all the guys hello for me and keep the girls company til I get back in 1950."

Pvt. Percy S. Lynn, in California - "There is a bunch of experts in here with me, most of them from Tennessee and Alabama. I never saw a bunch of hill-billies that can shoot a rifle like them. Doggone it, no A.P.O. yet!"

Lt. O.T. Hayes Jr., in England - "We are bombing the hell out of the square heads and from the way they throw up that flak they don't seem to like it."

Pvt. James A. Houser - "They have sent me somewhere in the Southwest Pacific. It has been hell to even try to write a letter with this boat reeling and rock, but at last the d--- thing has anchored."

Pfc. Henry A. Ford, in Italy - "A few days ago I met some of the home town boys, among them Coach Fulkerson, Jim Logan, Hersley Flowers, Roy Kirley, Ralph Arrowood and Jack Kennedy. We had quite a conversation concerning the old home town."

Lester Watterson, in Italy - "I met Peanut Smith while on a pass a few weeks ago. He is fat as a pig now. He looks to be bigger than when he worked for you all."

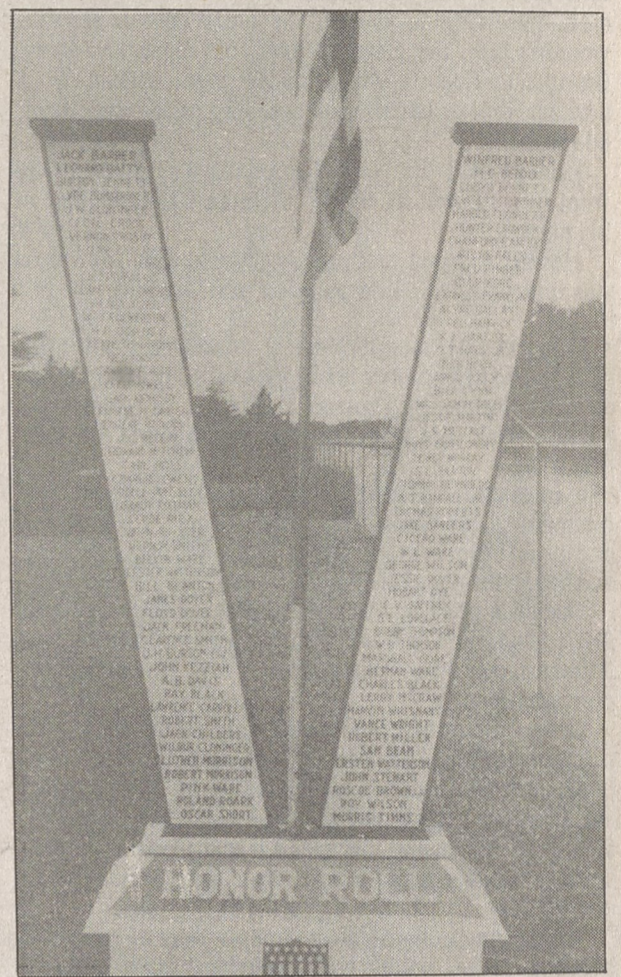
Pfc. Vernon L. "Peanut" Smith - "Well, I see you left 'Rose' (President Roosevelt) in the saddle. Good deal. He sent me over here and I want him to be the one to call me back."

Lt. C.T. Carpenter Jr., in Germany - "I don't even want to make a guess as to how many Huns are left to be slaughtered, but we are chopping them down fast."

M.E. Biddix - "These Japanese are my worst headache. I have been in quite a bit of action and it is no fun. Tell all the boys they had better watch for our ship and look for me."

T/Sgt. R.C. Crook, in France - "I am with a C-47 outfit hauling anybody or anything anywhere. Not a bad job while you are in the air but hell on the ground."

Cpl. Ralph Ware, in Southwest Pacific - "Just a note to let you know that I received a carton of Old Golds



VICTORY BARS AT MARGRACE

Listed Servicemen's Names

yesterday. They had been traveling over a year but finally caught up with me."

The Mountaineer also had a wit about him: "Jake Hord and Marvin Goforth journeyed to Shelby for a cow sale. There was a good looking cow being sold and the bidding was at fourteen and one half. Jake immediately bid 15. The auctioneer said 'sold' and Jake was quite happy about having bought such a good cow for \$15. However, when he learned that the bid was 15 cents per pound he went out and hid in Marvin's truck. It just don't do to moo at Jake yet."

"Clarence Jolly couldn't get much work out of his twister hands the first couple of weeks after he put those two girl doffers to work. Girls will wear slacks, you know. However, the situation seems to be somewhat improved at the present writing."

"Pete Gamble has decided he just as well go to war, since his wife takes care of his money, his neighbors tend to his business and his weavers run his job."

"And speaking of the gym, it hasn't been long since I went up there for my exam. The last doctor to examine me looked me over thoroughly, shook his head and said, 'old timer, you are the most perfect specimen of a total physical wreck that I have ever seen.' Four days later I got my classification card--1A. I had wanted one of those B cards--B here when they leave and B here when they come back."

"Dang my buttons if I didn't get my old muzzle loader down and prime her up for Sidney R. Dixon. That young buck sent me a letter and started it off 'hello Pop'."

"Sat on the porch of the hotel the other afternoon and watched the Fire Department have a water battle across the railroad tracks. They hooked one hose to the hydrant in front of Kings Mountain Drug Co., and the other on to the hydrant in front of the hotel and started firing away at each other. Dang my whiskers, if I had been 25 years younger I'd have gotten out there in that battle myself."

"From somewhere in Alaska comes a letter from one of the boys who writes us that he was informed upon his arrival there that in order to become a true Alaskan he would have to sleep with an Alaskan woman and shoot a polar bear. His comments were, that had his foresight been as good as his hindsight, he believes the best thing to have done would have been to have shot the woman and slept with the polar bear."

Many of the men thought that one of their worst enemies during the War was the "censor", who read their letters with a fine tooth comb, and usually by the time they got home they didn't resemble anything like a letter.

In one report, the Old Mountaineer Jr. said the censor made Peanut Smith's letter look like a "punch

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THE CITY OF KM PLANE

Purchased By Local Citizens Through War Bonds

Being POW Was Rougher On Family

Boyd Howell's Plane Shot Down In Germany

War Department telegrams were delivered by Coley Freeman taxi to the Sarah Howell home in the Bethlehem community on such a regular basis during World War 2 that T/Sgt. Boyd Howell's mother refused to open the telegram she received in May 1945 and the taxi driver read the message that Howell was released on May 3, 1945 after being shot down over Germany and taken to Stalag 17-B, Kreims, Austria.

The retired Kings Mountain rural mail carrier recalled those days with mixed emotions this week when he received a letter from his pilot who he had not heard from since both were among the 10-member crew of the 96th Group's 337th Squadron Wabbit Tracks III, a B-17 shot down over Schweinfurt on Oct. 14, 1943. The letter included an invitation for Howell and his wife, Betty, to visit California Memorial Day weekend with Mr. and Mrs. Robert Hermeson, of Mesa, Arizona, planning a reunion of the 337th Squadron.

Howell was a waist-gunner on a Flying Fortress shot down on the German-French border during an American raid of a ball-bearing factory over Schweinfurt on Oct. 14, 1943.

Howell had entered the service on Aug. 28, 1942, initially deferred because of family responsibilities af-

Boyd Howell

...In War Time



ter being drafted. He was offered deferment a second time and refused. After completing gunnery training in Arizona, he was offered the chance to teach and remain in Arizona. Howell recalled that he remembered words he said at age 24 that "he would take his chances with the Germans rather than burn up in the hot desert of Arizona." Those words he recalled many times after he was shot down over Germany and imprisoned by the Germans.

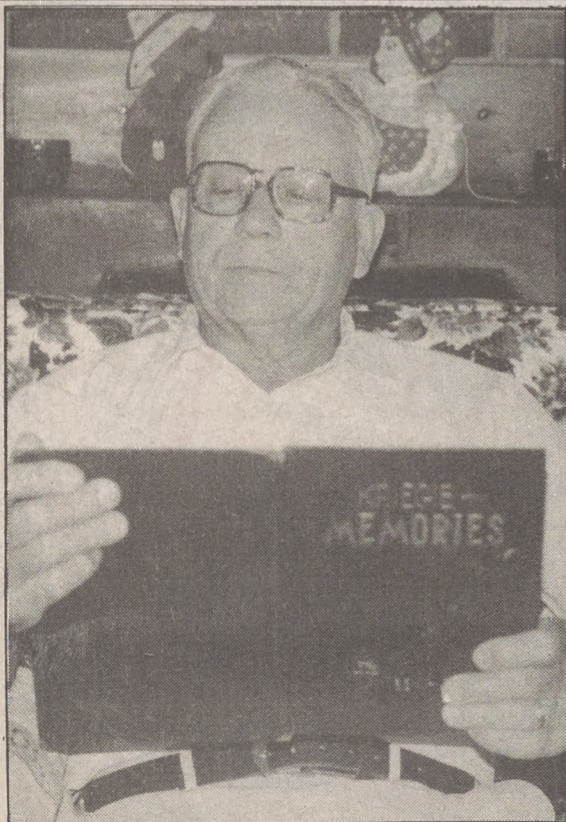
Reared in a family of four girls and five boys, Howell learned early about family responsibilities. After his father died in 1939 and the family home

burned in 1940, Howell led his family through some difficult times, he recalled. His mother, who died in 1976, saw three sons go off to war during World War 2. Howell's brothers, Jim in the U. S. Army and Roy Howell in the U. S. Navy.

"It was really harder for my family than for me back then because their only contact was with the War Department who kept them up-to-date and although prisoners were allowed one letter and two postal cards a month we were restricted about what we could write," he recalled. "There was one period Mother didn't hear from me for 10 months," he recalled. Howell said 4,000 Americans were in his compound, sectioned off by fences. "The YMCA sent books for us to read and the Red Cross sent eight million food parcels to Germany but most of the food we didn't get," he said.

Howell said he learned to survive by eating whatever was placed before him, whether he liked it or not. American soldiers survived because they had been inoculated for fever while Russian soldiers in the same camp died from fever and starvation. Before his imprisonment he recuperated from knee and hand wounds in the French underground. He was captured

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BOYD HOWELL
Looks Over His Memories