

## **MARTY - THE DRUNK WE TREATED LIKE A DOG**

It came to pass that I went into the Christmas tree business. The year was 1991 and I was about to celebrate my fifty-third birthday.

My main job at that time was working as a waiter at the Nantahala Outdoor Center in Bryson City, North Carolina. Daisy worked at the same place. She was the General Manager of Relia's Garden Restaurant and I waited tables. Generally speaking, I was and remain a happy man. I enjoyed my work. But being a waiter was not enough. So I had a number of side jobs. I did a little catering on the side, and was buying and selling used restaurant equipment on a small scale.

The Nantahala Outdoor Center, let's call it NOC, conducted the largest business in Swain County. With four hundred employees, it was the largest employer in the county. It was bigger even than the Board of Education as Swain County had only eight thousand residents if you didn't count the Cherokee Indian Reservation which straddled three counties.

Our employee-owned company did guided white water rafting trips on the Nantahala and five other rivers in the region. Headquarters was on the Nantahala and we had outposts on four other rivers.

NOC enrolled students in classes, called clinics, to learn white water kayaking and canoeing, rock climbing, fly fishing, and other outdoor sports. It ran schools for river guides and

## Bill's Journey ~ Marty the Drunk We Treated Like a Dog

outdoor adventure leadership and even had an Adventure Travel Department to take boaters as far away as Nepal, Costa Rica, and to other parts of the U.S.

October thirty-first ended the season for Daisy and me. Our financial picture was such that we needed a little work to tide us over the winter. I took another serving job working dinner at the Point After Restaurant in Sylva, N.C. So I had two full-time jobs for a few years.

Off-season, many of the NOC staff went to work at ski resorts. Some led Adventure trips and some sold Christmas trees. When I found out that Christmas tree lot managers made \$500.00 a week, it sounded good. I traveled to Boone, North Carolina, an eight hour round trip to talk to the owner of a Christmas tree farm who sold his Fraser firs at a dozen different locations in San Antonio, Texas.



Fraser firs only grow in the southeastern Appalachian Mountains. This is in western North Carolina, southwestern Virginia, and eastern Tennessee at elevations from 4,000 feet up to 6,800 feet which includes the summit of Mount Mitchell, the region's highest point.

The climate in this area of America is cool and moist, with short, cool summers and cold winters with heavy snowfall.

I got the job and found that the business was pretty simple and a lot of fun. They gave me a leave of absence from the Point After Restaurant. Toward the end of my inventory, close to Christmas Day, I had a revelation. "Self," I said, "why not go into the business on your own. You can make lots of money."

Thus it was the following year that I woke up in Huntsville, Alabama one morning, sleeping in a little travel trailer. Dan, my Son-in-law was still sleeping in the other bunk. We were in a parking lot in Huntsville, Alabama.

There was a knock on the door. The sound was made by a guy who had come by the day before looking for work. But we'd turned him away.

He looked up at me and said. "Sir. I need help..." The short, slender man with an earnest sunburned face looked up at me and explained, "I'm on the way to Texas but my water pump's broke and I need \$40.00 to fix it. I have to hurry because there's a job waiting there for me. "Do



This photo is of a similar type of trailer. We took no pictures that I remember on the Xmas tree lots.

you have some work here today?"

He seemed nice even though his clothes were rough and his hands were very dirty; like he'd been trying to fix a sorry old car with the wrong tools.

I gestured to our empty lot and said, "Sorry. No work's available.

## Bill's Journey ~ Marty the Drunk We Treated Like a Dog

We haven't gotten our trees yet. They're due tomorrow."

"Look. I'm desperate." He pulled a knife from his jacket pocket and looked at me with harried eyes.

"This is an Uncle Henry and it's worth \$100.00. You can have it for \$25.00."

He handed me a heavy, cherry-wood and brass-handled pocket knife. Just the kind of knife I wanted to cut the string off the 600 or so trees that were on the way.

"Wait a minute," I said. I closed the door behind me and got some bills from my wallet.

Back at the door, still in my sleeping sweats, I stepped out of the trailer, looked him in the eye and said, "I'll give you..." I paused looking at him. Just a little joke to make him think I was going to bargain him down. "\$40.00 and not a penny less," I finished.

His mouth dropped in surprise and a tear came to his eye. "Thank you sir!" he said reaching out to shake my hand. "My name's Marty and I'll remember you in my prayers."

"I'm Bill, Marty. Glad I could help."

When he finished with my hand he again reached into his pocket. "You've been so nice, I want to give you this genuine leather sheath for the knife. I hope it works for you. Good luck with your trees." He walked off whistling and headed up the embankment for the highway intersection we were on.

I told Dan about Marty as we were having our coffee and planning the day. He said, "Marty is probably heading for the nearest bar."

Dan was street-wise. Sadly, I thought he was right.

It surprised me when Dan had asked me if he could participate in the tree sale in the summer when I was first thinking it through. He and Kris lived in NYC but was familiar with Huntsville through his property management and development job. He thought it would be a great place to do the business. He said he was semi-unemployed and could use some extra money.

The Christmas tree retail business takes some doing and quite a lot of money to get started. Dan brought knowledge of a place to sell, huge energy and strength and \$7,000.00 in cash! I'd already borrowed \$5,000.00 from the Self Help Credit Union and had found a grower in Haywood County who would extend credit to help fund our enterprise.

Before I finish Marty's story I want to tell you a little about our tree business. We called it Merry Christmas Trees and used my existing corporation, Bill's Creative Catering Company, Inc. to conduct the business.

We rented a 30' by 60' circus tent for \$800.00. We leased the corner of a busy intersection for \$1,000.00 and found a guy in Huntsville who rented us a brand new 30' travel trailer for



This is kind of like the tent we rented. Ours had two 14 foot inside poles and detachable side curtains. We eventually bought one and used it for years.

## Bill's Journey ~ Marty the Drunk We Treated Like a Dog

\$1,000.00. We spent about \$600.00 freight to load and transport six hundred cut Fraser Fir trees and have them delivered on a big flat bed semi. We bought lights, lumber and the services of an electrician. We rented a U-Haul trailer.

We bought an inventory of excellent home tree stands to have something else to sell. The trailer was heavily loaded with ten potted Fraser firs, the lumber for the display stands I'd designed, the tent and our tools. It was quite an expedition for Dan's Ford Explorer truck. Especially on the uphill bits. The little Frasers with their burlap wrapped root balls were very heavy.

Six hundred trees cost about \$12,000. We bought large and small trees but mostly six and seven-footers. So we started with a \$17,000.00 nut and knew we'd have to be strong and lucky to get our money back.

We needed a local bank to deposit our cash and do our credit card sales. We needed a business license, permits for signs and electrical, signs, a water source to keep the trees fresh,

Fraser fir is widely used as a Christmas tree because of its fragrance, shape, strong limbs, and ability to retain its soft needles for a long time when cut.

It's been used more times as the official White House Christmas tree than any other type of tree. Since the needles are soft and do not prick it's easy to hang the ornaments.



and phone service to keep in touch with the family. This was before the advent of cell phones. The City of Huntsville made us pay estimated sales tax up front based on estimated sales.

Now, years later, I feel a kinship with the guys hawking Christmas trees by the side of the road as do Dan and our wives. They played a roll too in future years as I might share with you in another chapter.

### **For now - It's The Marty Show!**

The trees arrived the next day and Dan and I were very busy. We had twenty display stands, each holding six or eight trees. Each displayed tree sat in a little bucket of water to keep it fresh. The bulk of our 600 trees went into a forty-foot, closed semi trailer we'd rented to keep them safe and out of the sun.

Marty stopped by to say hello as we were working our tails off. He was with a well dressed fellow he introduced as his friend who gave him a ride. The visit lasted about two minutes and we thought we'd seen the last of him. I was putting his little Uncle Henry to good use cutting the strings off each tree as we set it in its little bucket.

It was the day before Thanksgiving and we were happy that a few customers came to chat and a few to buy. Thanksgiving was our official opening day. We had hired a few locals to help out. Most were students but some were just unemployed.

## **Bill's Journey ~ Marty the Drunk We Treated Like a Dog**

We worked late and went to bed tired. So when the knock came at eight o'clock the next morning Dan and I were still in our beds.

I went to the door and found Marty standing there-his fourth visit to our little compound. He was dirty and disheveled and had a little cut over his eye. He looked at me ruefully and said, "Bill. I need help. The guy I was with yesterday got drunk last night and beat me up.

"He threw me out on the street and I slept in the woods last night. Is there anyway you guys could give me a job?"

After consulting with Dan we agreed that we really did not want Marty waiting on our customers and did not need his help. But we also agreed that we might offer him some help. We gave him \$10.00 and permission to sleep in our un-insulated storage trailer. We fed him a hamburger at noon as we commenced to do our business for the day. It was a pretty good sales day and we felt that things were going all right. We had burgers again for supper and gave one to Marty.

We turned off the lights and said good night to Marty. Sitting in the side door of the trailer, smoking a cigarette as his legs dangled.

The next morning there was a knock on the door. Marty again. "Bill. You have customers on the lot."

"Oh, thanks Marty." I ran to put on my shoes and a jacket over my sleep sweats. Dan and I had not even heard the car arrive. Mom, dad and three young ones were poking around for the perfect tree. We started the day with a sale and before we knew it was 9:00 PM and we were closed for the night. Marty loaded a few trees for customers during the day and may have earned a tip or two. We fed him every time we ate.

Thus established a pattern that maintained until December 22 when we called it quits to pack and race north to New Jersey where Daisy and I were to spend the Christmas Holiday with Dan and Kris.

It can get pretty cold in Huntsville but Dan and I were snug in our little trailer. I gave Marty the gift of the sleeping bag my daughter Kim had given to me the previous year as a birthday gift. So, for the first time in days Marty slept warm. Dan and I slept in just about every day and, just about every day, Marty woke us up, calling out "Guys - there's a customer on the lot," as he knocked on the door.

We took him to a nice neighborhood Chinese one night. Once, in a fit of generosity, we put him up in a hotel so that he could have a shower. Otherwise he used our rented Porta John. He used the men's room in the garage down the street for a wash.

Dan and I took turns going to the local health club for showers and even a swim. We had traded the club manager a Christmas tree for the privilege!

Finally we were down to just a few trees. We packed our trailer. It was much lighter with-

## Bill's Journey ~ Marty the Drunk We Treated Like a Dog

out the burlap bagged trees we'd hauled from North Carolina. Marty seemed sad to see us leave and we felt sorry for him. We'd given him \$20.00 once in awhile for his efforts but never a real paycheck. We'd been kind. I felt like we'd treated him like a dog. Never letting him fully into our circle.

We gave Marty our last six trees and one display stand because we were in a hurry to leave. Before we threw our last few things into the Explorer, he had sold the trees for \$25.00 each.

"Dang!" said Dan. We should have waited a bit.

Seasons turned over and I was hard at work at Relia's Garden Restaurant. Eleven P.M. and I was mopping the kitchen. Tired, sweaty and happy with my \$126.00 in tips. We also got \$5.00 per hour and a 401k plan. Not bad for a Thursday night. "Bill. There's someone here at the front door who wants to see you."

Damned if it wasn't Marty. Dirty. Smelling of sewer, smoke, and booze in equal measure. A guy stood behind him said, "Marty said he had to see you. So I brung him from town."

"Bill!" said Marty as he stepped in for a hug. "I'm here about that job you promised me." My work mates stood around grinning.

I did my best to persuade Marty that he was dreaming about the job. But I told him I had a friend who'd hire him as a dishwasher. "Call me in the morning for the telephone number."

"Bill. I can't go to no job looking like this." He spread his arms. "I need to do laundry."

"Marty you can have this for the laundry but you gotta go now. Your friend will take you back to town." Relia's Garden was way out in the country.

He looked at the five dollar bill in my hand and said, "Bill! What planet have you been living on? That ain't enough to do laundry." So I gave him twenty. He thanked me and said he'd call for the job number in the morning.

I never saw or heard from Marty again. But I remember a few other snippets of the story.

Dan and I had stopped at a convenience store in Murphy, North Carolina on December twenty-third, while on our way to return the rented tent. There was a display of Uncle Henry knives and I went right to it because my Uncle Henry had disappeared and I wanted to see if it was on sale there. Sure enough. It was priced at twenty five dollars including the imitation leather sheath!

A conversation sticks in my mind. I was driving Marty to the motel the night we rented him a room to clean up. We were talking about life and I ventured an opinion to Marty. "Marty," I said. "You should get help with your drinking problem"

He said, with a serious look, "Bill. You have to understand. I'm not an alcoholic. I'm just a drunk. I don't need help!"