

Aging Lifestyles: A TV star refuses to fade away

by Joe_Volz

Whatever happens to old TV stars once the screen goes to black on their popular series?

Here is Ben Jones' story, which happens to be a much better yarn than the hit CBS Georgia redneck comedy, "The Dukes of Hazzard," which starred Ben for seven years in the 1980s. "The Dukes of Hazzard" was a "good old boy" series, a slapstick version of a horse opera - substitute the orange-red Dodge Charger, General Lee, for a heroic horse like Trigger or Silver.

Ben, now 65, who played a wacky mechanic, Cooter Davenport, demonstrates that there is life after stardom if you play your cards right. His memoirs, "Redneck Boy in the Promised Land," are being published by Random House.

Ben's climb up from poverty, his descent into drunkenness and his climb out to star in the show is definitely a saga in itself and, unlike "The Dukes of Hazzard," there is nothing funny about it.

I wondered whatever happened to Ben.

He had gone on to serve in Congress for a couple of terms as a Georgia Democrat until he was defeated by Newt Gingrich in the early 1990s.

Recently, I found Ben living nicely, with his fifth wife, Alma, in rural Virginia on a 25-acre spread at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Ben is definitely an upscale Cooter these days, residing in a pre-Revolutionary War log house.

But when I drove up a long, rutted driveway to a weather-beaten old farmhouse, my first impression was that maybe old Ben wasn't doing that well after all. There was an ancient pickup parked on the grass.

Ben, now gray-haired and a few pounds heavier than TV days, limped out to greet me. He's had a number of knee operations, which have slowed him down just a bit.

"I can walk but I don't do any road running anymore," he told me.

He sure dressed like a good old boy, wearing a black T-shirt, baggy tan corduroys and moccasins.

That house, though, isn't the family mansion. The log house up the road is home. Ben uses the tenant shack as his office. "Alma doesn't want me messing up the house," said Ben. When he took up acting while a student at the University of North Carolina, he had already lived a hard life. He was born in a coldwater shack along the railroad tracks in Portsmouth, Va. Dear old dad was a violent drunk. It was a life of constant despair.

Ben, himself, spent a lot of nights in jail as a young man after violent brawls. He had been married and divorced four times until he met, Alma, the public relations director for the famed Fords Theater in Washington.

One of the more intriguing aspects of Ben's "retirement" is that more people are watching the Dukes these days than ever caught the original series. The old Dukes show is regularly appearing on cable TV. The CMT network features it nightly in prime time. Ben opened up shops in Gatlinburg and Nashville, Tenn., selling Hazzard memorabilia.

The Hazzard mania is so frenetic among younger generations that each year Ben puts on a big jamboree rounding up the old cast, performing with Cooter's garage band - Ben's the singer - and bringing in autos for a daredevil stunt show. The latest show in Nashville in July drew almost 100,000 spectators for the weekend.

Of his own life, Ben recalls, "My road to the halls of Congress was an unlikely one. In fact, most folks who had known me 12 years before I was elected wouldn't have bet on my living much longer." That was the time of drinking and brawling and passing out in alcoholic stupors.

One September morn, he hit bottom suffering from delirium tremens in an Atlanta flophouse. And that was the day he began his road to out of the mire.

"With what I thought was my last breath, I pleaded, 'Please God, help me.'"

Within two years, he won the Dukes of Hazzard role.

Is there life after retirement?

You bet.

Ben is even starting a new career, playing the offbeat former St. Louis Cardinals pitcher of the 1930s, Dizzy Dean. Ben does a one-man show and is putting together a musical on old Diz.

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