

Glover, Polly. Marks On The Land: The Story of Obion.
Collector's Edition
Martin, TN: The University of Tennessee at Martin, 1975.

This volume is a welcome respite from the daily technology of our fledgling twenty-first century. Lured from a millennium of modems transferring bits of vital information across the internet, discoveries of the human genome, and genetically engineered tomatoes whose roots may never have touched soil, the memories captured by Glover are a comfortable and secure tether to the area's past that makes us human in the largest sense of the word.

Glover states that she has gathered the information contained in the book over a fourteen-year period. Like an archaeologist peeling back layers of the dusty past, she has gleaned golden artifacts of an era nearly gone to share with us from friends, family, and folklore. Marks On The Land is of interest to anyone curious about this area's history who has fond memories of a small town and a lifestyle all but vanished. Marks On The Land contains a blueprint of Obion, Tennessee, a generous number of photographs, an account of a historical pageant to celebrate Obion's centennial, but also much that is not so easily cataloged.

Glover has given body and vivid weight to the teeming tide of life that has ebbed and flowed, much as the ocean once did, over the land of Obion. From the first page the reader is immersed in detail that grounds us in the reality of Obion:

At the post office each....[person] swirls the dials to his box combination and reaches in. Next moment, numbers still whirling down, memories reel up....For Obion is a place, but it is also a memory. In memory, it is

thousands of days for the people who've walked over this earth, where once the green woods stood.

In the tradition of the storytellers to whom she pays homage--Jo Jo Watson, for instance--Glover seems to join the conversation by the pot-bellied stove at John Pryor's store, leaving behind the beeping impersonal bar-code scanners of today to nestle us in what was. There we hear Jesse Wells Fox say, "You can be gone three or six or ten years and go back in to pick up the story where you left off--same stories--same people." Glover tells us, "The stories have a continuity," as she continues this tradition, picking up these stories and passing them on.

The story of Obion is full of tales so large the modern mind has trouble initially stretching to accommodate them, earthquakes, for instance, described in poignant prose: "Occasionally the earth moved, in 1776, 1791, 1795--stirring as the Indian might turn in his sleep....moved her trees and houses in chaotic labor." Glover poetically sums up Obion's previous century: "The story of man's rising and falling here, his fortunes' quakes, has breath." She speaks of how the railroad marked and formed the land and its people's future. The reader feels he is seeing the very sinew of the land. Again Glover's turn of phrase lifts her book beyond a mere taxonomy of informative bits of history to become enjoyable literature in its own right: "Trains roll through, 150 cars long, five engines straining...and at night when the highway traffic is quiet, the tank cars glisten in the moonlight."

There is a litany of names that still echo in the area today, reverberating with historical weight and spoken with the

reverence of a grandmother reading Genesis to her progeny. Among the famous names--Davy Crockett and John Dillinger--the stories of Obion are saturated with the names of equally fascinating if not such renowned characters. There is M.C. Thompson, who kept a list of his prospective pallbearers, editing people out of his service whenever they irritated him. Bill Ragain, the town water sprinkler, delighted to open the sprinkler on people working their yards, had been known to pilfer a lady's pillow to make the seat of his machine more comfortable.

In reading about Obion, the reader senses an intimacy not often found today. In a world of clear cutting of small towns like so many trees in the name of progress, Obion's memories stand rooted. It is a place where neighbors have compared the height of horse weeds in back yards--where summer sounds of lawn mowers and screen doors slamming punctuate twilight--People gather to enjoy peanuts floating in Coca-Cola bottles before they empty these, ritually comparing city stamps on the bottoms of bottles--the holder of the closest city buying the next round. The reader will see all the trappings of closeness that has made the small towns of America. Glover tells us, "And the thing about a small town is that it offers a space small enough for people to hear when someone calls for help; space small enough for people to listen to each other."

We see Obion and its people in the details:

A person doesn't have to go fast. There is time to notice the flowers around a house, or the maples arching orange and red across Broadway. We see people pausing to take in life's subtler points: Lex Shore....said of

our lives here, "We're just like machines. I meet the garbage truck every day between my block and town." There may be an order to the trips we take, waiting at a certain block for a friend to drive past as usual each morning--movements like the ordered forward and back of a minuet--but within this pattern there is the unexpected.

We see each person leaves a legacy: "Every person does make a difference. Along the road by the old cedars, yellow 'butter'n eggs' grow up in the spring. Some woman planted them--and they outlived her and the house. They spread down the hill reminding us of her."

Obion's people seem as warm as the earth after a full day's sun. Glover's story is a story of people tied to the land's cycles, fortunes found and lost: "And as inevitably as Queen Anne's lace dries and curls into her nest, as softly as crape myrtle blossoms shower downward, those men and women, of tremendous energy...will, die." And when these people left, others notice, a void was felt. Evidence of this is shown in the builders of the Church of Christ, halting construction for the funeral of Uncle Bill, a man who had greeted them with a happy smile as he passed the site each day. Ultimately this is a book about people, good people, and how they shaped the land and each other.

Glover's book is gratifying reading even for those not indigenous to this area. After reading this book, I feel much like the high school graduate who "...looks casually past people he has been seeing always but may never see again." I feel I have been to the celebration of Obion with old friends and hesitate to leave.

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