



KENTUCKY'S SMALLEST TOWN

“There’s just something about the river,” said **Mary Lou Griffin**, referring to the bucolic, winding Cumberland River that serves as the backdrop of Kentucky’s smallest town: Dycusburg. The hamlet in Crittenden County had an official population of 39 in the 2000 census. And as Griffin smilingly suggests, only the river (and a handful of folks who live there) knows its storied past.

“It is a river town, and once in a bygone era was a thriving, glamorous town typical of river towns. It boasted hotels, tobacco warehouses, saloons and all the colorful people that traveled by paddlewheel boats,” Griffin said.

A FRENETIC HEYDAY

Dycusburg incorporated in 1848, and business began to grow rapidly. Mercantile and dry goods stores, a tomato canning factory, tobacco warehouses, a flour mill, saloons, a jail, bank, and even a city hall once were located here. The booming prosperity, though, came to an end in 1906 when the city suffered a devastating fire.

After the fire, business continued when the townsfolk rebuilt. Contributing to the town’s success was the demand for cigarettes and chewing tobacco, particularly in the South, where production was increasing at a feverish pace.

Happy to feed the need and to line their wallets, **William Lee Bennett** and his brother, **Henry B. Bennett**, focused their efforts on the pungent weed.

The Bennetts realized they could make money by purchasing tobacco for a corporate monopoly: the American Tobacco Company (ATC) trust, owned by **James B. Duke**. Henry purchased ATC trust tobacco for warehouses in Paducah and refused to join the Dark Tobacco District Planters’ Protection Association (PPA), a group with a principal goal of raising tobacco prices by cooperative marketing of the crop.

Despite being warned several times by the PPA-backed “Tobacco Night Riders,” Henry continued to flaunt his independence.

One February night, Henry bellied up to the bar in adjacent Eddyville. Whiskey taking hold, he loudly dared anyone to question his business decisions. If he wanted to set his own prices, he would. Though he was ready to fight, the bar remained silent.

Little did he know that several Night Riders were in his midst.

Word of Bennett’s challenge spread far and wide. Within days, a group of more than 300 masked Night Riders

trekked eight miles from Eddyville to Dycusburg, showing up at Henry's door.

Henry refused to leave the house, fearing the worst. One frustrated rider cried out, "We'll burn him out! Get the torch!"

With that, Henry emerged. In the dark of night, they tied Henry to an oak tree, beating him mercilessly. The message of his beating was strong and silencing for independent farmers like Bennett. Incidents of violence kept people at arm's length from the town, kindling its ill repute.

Although he lived, Bennett was physically disabled from the torturous lashing. He sued the Night Riders, but died in 1910 at age 50. Pending charges were dropped.

His embittered wife had these words engraved on Henry Bennett's massive tombstone, still standing at the Dycusburg cemetery: "Killed. By the Night-Riders."

Months later, another destructive fire engulfed Dycusburg. Then the bank relocated across the Cumberland in neighboring Tiline in Livingston County, dealing the town a fatal blow. Although Dycusburg still boasted a handful of businesses after the second fire, it never recovered to the level of its frenetic and prospering heyday.

River rats who rolled through the community did no favors for the reputation of the town, according to Griffin. It's a reputation that many river communities struggle with today. Griffin said that she's amused that the town even "has a reputation at all," given its population.

"As all river towns had, Dycusburg gained a rough reputation because of the sordid people landing here. Now it is a sleepy little village where a riverboat coming by is a source of interest. It never fails to fascinate me when a boat is coming by and I always pause to admire it as do so many other people in our little town," she said.

EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME

Tina Cochrum writes the Dycusburg news item for the local newspaper, *The Crittenden Press*. She said she enjoys living in Dycusburg because "everyone knows everyone, and while that may not always be a good thing, it is in Dycusburg. We are all family. If anyone needs anything, someone is there. It's a close community where everyone loves and cares for each other."

She recalls fondly many Dycusburg memories: being baptized in the Cumberland River, spinning on bar stools at one of the two general stores, the Dycusburg baseball diamond, skipping rocks on the river, fishing off the creek banks, and the occasional times when the river would swell beyond its banks.

"When the backwater flooded our road, we'd ride in the back of a wagon to get to my aunt's house and spend a week or two while we waited for the flood waters to subside," she said.

After living in various places, Cochrum returned to Dycusburg earlier this year, bumping up the census a notch. She said she never had a doubt that she would return to Dycusburg, simply because it's "in my blood."

"I love this place," she said. "Now, I can't imagine calling another place home."

A SLOWER LIFESTYLE

The type of pace Griffin and Cochrum describe is typical of tiny communities, explained **Brenda Underdown**, a Crittenden County historian and genealogist.

"Small towns provide the opportunity to be able to know your neighbors and belong to a community that cares about its people. Small towns and communities just seem to naturally be more caring and friendly."

Underdown said closely knit communities afford opportunities to feel more woven into the town's fabric. "People can get involved in their town's activities, work together



ERIC MOORE

The back of Henry Bennett's tombstone in the Dycusburg Cemetery.



ERIC MOORE

and feel like an important and productive part of their town. You're not just an unknown person. Rather, you are a vital part of the community. The slower lifestyle provides a better chance to slow down, view the beautiful countryside scenery and just enjoy life more," she said.

Underdown also stresses the importance of knowing the history of smaller towns like Dycusburg.

"So many rural towns that made us what we are today have disappeared. Without preserving their history and genealogy through stories, books and photos, this part of our, and future generations', history will be lost. The history of places like Dycusburg needs to be preserved so future generations will know what life was like through the years. If people understand Dycusburg's history, they can appreciate what they have today, or dream about life in years gone by."

—MATTHEW T. PATTON

Matthew T. Patton is a freelance writer and medical editor. He grew up on a farm just outside of Dycusburg and is Web master of dycusburg.com.