

# Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary – soon to be a distillery and tourist destination

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on August 17, 2015)

We have recently seen Lake City change its name to Rocky Top and announce plans for creating a tourist destination. We also have another most unusual tourist destination being created less than 20 minutes from Oak Ridge!

It is Brushy Mountain Prison, a place where not too long ago some of the most hardened criminals reluctantly called home and where the prison guards would tell some of the toughest inmates, "See you tomorrow, I am going home to my family... and what are your plans?"

The prisoners knew it was "the end of the line" for them. One person who worked at Brushy Mountain Prison and saw many inmates processed into the facility, said, "Even the strongest and most hard hearted men would sometimes breakdown and cry when the door closed behind them." Brushy Mountain Prison truly was the end of the line for many criminals.

How do I know all this? Recently, the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance held one of our most successful "Summer Suppers" there. I am proud to serve on the board of directors and was happy to be able to help with the Morgan County folks who planned the supper for well over 120 people.

There were so many volunteers, I could not begin to name them all, but I must recognize Sharon Kreis and Sara Goodman, board members of the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance, as well as Lisa Rutherford, Director of the Morgan County Economic Development Board. And I am sure Sharon and Sara would both tell you they could not have done the Summer Supper without lots of volunteer help!

The evening of July 18, 2015, was a huge success with a very large contingent of people getting tours into a place like none other and excellent BBQ from "Dead End BBQ." Even with the threat of thunderstorms, the evening was most enjoyable. Not to mention the access to the prison

Several of the former workers at the prison served as tour guides, Mark Tucker, Keith Adkisson, Freddy Seavers, and Mark Norman. They have all worked many years at Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary. And they told the tour groups some of the most amazing stories!

While James Earl Ray, convicted of assassinating Martin Luther King, is by far the most well-known inmate, these former officials of the prison said he was certainly not the most dangerous nor the meanest prisoner to have been housed there.

They told of others who were far worse to manage and explained how the prisoners actually established a controlling culture within the prison that had the effect of ruling the inmate behavior. Keeping the prisoners in the prison and locked up in cells was one thing, but controlling their behavior toward one another when they were outside their cells was mostly done within the prisoners themselves.

We were shown that the most likely place for one prisoner to attack another was near the door from the cell block to the yard which is where they first could encounter one another. That is where the attacks usually took place, at the very first opportunity the attacker had to get close to the victim.

The life inside the prison described to us by these former employees is not like anything else I have ever heard described. The relationships developed were such that life inside the prison was subject to a set of rules understood by both the prisoners and those who were employed to guard them. Such a situation is hard to imagine for those of us who have never experienced anything similar.

Another anomaly is the art that has been painted on the walls of the cafeteria. Much of it is of quite good quality and shows artistic abilities in the artist. Yet some shows a dark brooding aspect of what goes on in the mind of someone locked up day after day.

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Brushy Mountain Prison may well be the only such prison where the wall is not complete surrounding the facility. There is a section on the north side of the grounds that is actually a huge natural rock formation. The prisoners used to be tied off with a safety rope at the top and kept the brush and small trees cut down to keep the wall clear so no one could climb out.

Once several years before the prison closed, a small fawn fell from the ledge into the prison. Some of the prisoners took care of the injured little fellow and nursed it back to health. The deer, named "Geronimo" by the inmates, stayed there inside the prison for a number of years, growing to be an adult buck. He was treated well and fed routinely.

The buck, Geronimo, was even moved with the prisoners when all of them left Brushy Mountain. However, he did not live long in his new home, because another group (gang really) of prisoners decided to kill him to spite the prisoners who brought him with them. This is but another demonstration of the internal ruling system that exists within prison walls. It is all about power! Power over life and death! Strange, but true.

One story often related concerning a prisoner from Brushy Mountain is that of Mary Evans and Tim Kirk. She helped him escape while he was away from the prison on a doctor's visit. The story is one that can be found online. Tim Kirk is remembered as being persuasive and shrewd. They were captured.

There is also the story about a prisoner, James Slagle, who hid in a box and attempted to ship himself out by addressing the box for shipment and hiding inside. That did not work too well, even though he did get outside the prison walls. He did not wait long enough to bust out of the box. When he did so near the outside of the prison, an off-duty guard who was rabbit hunting in the area saw Slagle jump off the back of the truck and called the warden.

Soon they had the dogs after him and even though he attempted to fool the dogs by walking in a stream, he was soon caught and returned to the prison. He was, of course, put in the hole! The place called the "Hole" is beneath the chapel and is dark and very small. It is more miserable than can be imagined.

We were given a tour during the Summer Supper and when the door is closed and the flashlights turned off, you literally cannot see your hand in front of your face. People on the tours did not last long at all in that place! They were scrambling for the light to be turned back on and the door opened!

Of course, James Earl Ray is most famous for the escape he managed by climbing over the wall very near the rock face bluff. He and six other prisoners climbed a 14 foot wall using a ladder made from pipe sections while a staged fight was going on in the other end of the prison yard. When the distraction was discovered the alarm was sounded and the seventh would be escapee was shot and wounded just outside the wall. All were captured within days.

James Earl Ray was found less than three days later just eight miles from the prison. He was hiding beneath leaves and very tired and worn from his 55 hours in the woods behind Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary! Anyone who does not know the wooded area behind Brushy Mountain will not understand why he only got as far as he did. Within two days after Ray's capture all the rest were captured too.

This escape is what led to what has been called the world's most difficult ultramarathon endurance race, the Barkley Marathons at Frozen Head State Park. Only a handful have ever finished the race while over 700 have started it. The route now goes through the tunnel beneath Brushy Mountain Prison! My son, Zane has run the Barkley twice and on his second attempt he completed over two laps of the five laps required to finish the race.

Brushy Mountain prison was built in 1896. For many years, maybe as late as 1938, the prisoners were used to mine coal in the nearby mountain. They would work in shifts and share cells, one worked while

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the other slept. The story is told of a two “whipping posts” that stood very near the entrance and exit to the cell blocks. These posts were used to tie prisoners and whip them if they did not meet their quota of coal taken from the mine on a given day. Hard to imagine, huh.

Of course, using convict labor in coal mines, starting in 1877, is why the Coal Creek War was fought in 1891 in what was then Coal Creek and then Lake City and now Rocky Top. The Brushy Mountain prison was actually built to house the convicts working in the state owned mines in Brushy Mountain.

So, what is in store for the historic old prison now that the penitentiary was closed in 2009?

The Brushy Mountain Group has a vision for the prison and grounds that holds much promise. This company has a fresh approach built around a new distillery.

The Morgan County Economic Development Board has taken the property and buildings from the state. State Senator Ken Yager is quoted as saying, "It was in the fifth year of a five year decommissioning process and quite frankly when the state is done with it, they would have just walked away from it."

But with creative planning and partnerships, Brian May, partner of the Brushy Mountain Group has said that his group has gone through all the proper channels with the state and are ready to create something folks in Morgan County and East Tennessee can be proud to have there. He is convinced the tourists will flock to see the prison and distillery, RV Park, concert venue, Bed & Breakfast, museum, gift shop and horse stables, to name a few of the ideas he is working to bring to fruition.

Don Edwards, Morgan County Mayor has said this new venture at Brushy Mountain will transform the job market in Morgan County. The Brushy Mountain Group has said they hope to hire more than 300 people and even more as the whole thing gets going. .

The project is expected to be complete in the summer of 2016, according to information on their website: <http://brushymtngroup.com/>

Here is an interesting quote from their website: "Tourism is Tennessee's second largest industry. According to the U.S. Travel Association, tourism expenditures in the State of Tennessee have increased every year for six consecutive years. More than 50 million people visit Tennessee each year. The U.S. Travel Association estimates tourism is responsible for a \$14 billion impact on the state."I expect to see the same type of thing happen in Oak Ridge with the implementation of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park! Exciting times in East Tennessee!!



Ray Smith in James Earl Ray's cell!

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Entrance to Brushy Mountain Prison



Tour of James Earl Ray's cell



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Entrance to the “hole”



Whiskey to be brewed at Brushy Mountain Distillery

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Keith Adkisson taking a tour through the cafeteria where the art is painted on the walls – the walls are peeling and the art will soon be gone if something is not done to preserve it quickly



Entrance and exit to and from cell block where first contact could be made and thus many fights and attacks, even murders occurred