

2023 Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of May 1, 2023)

Kay Brookshire brings us the following story about this year's program. I am looking forward to it again this year, but I am especially eager to hear Bil Lepp tell his version of the famous "John Hendrix Story." Enjoy what Kay has to say to us!

"Storytelling brings people together. It builds community and gives us shared experiences. When listening to stories we learn. We feel. We laugh. We cry. Sometimes at the same time."

--Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival Founders

The Rev. Robert B. Jones Sr. describes storytelling as the oldest form of entertainment in the human species.

"Before we even had music as we recognize it, and maybe even before language as we recognize it, some caveman, probably through grunts and motions, is describing the animal he was hunting, and whether he got it or it got away," Jones said.

"Think about something as ancient as the Bible, a collection of stories that probably were passed down orally for hundreds and thousands of years before somebody decided to write them down," he said.

Stories offer a path to impart wisdom, knowledge and humor, Jones believes.

"Your life can be going in a certain direction, and you hear a story that resonates with you. It can be factual, or it can be like Aesop's fables, and it causes you to think about your behavior and change it," he said. An example, he said, is the Aesop's fable his six-year-old granddaughter read to him recently about the dog who saw his reflection of the bone in his mouth on a pond and dropped the bone in the pond to go after the reflection.

"Immediately it struck me how many people do that – they chase the illusion of something, while they lose what they already have," Jones said.

Jones will be one of three storytellers bringing tales to the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival at the Grove Theater in Oak Ridge on Friday and Saturday, June 2 and 3. Jones, a native of Detroit and an inspirational storyteller and musician, will headline the 7 p.m. program June 2 with his presentation, "American History Through Music." Jones links his stories with original and traditional songs that celebrate the history, humor, and power of American Roots music.

Joining him will be Lyn Ford, a fourth generation, nationally recognized, "Appalachian" storyteller, blending her African American heritage with history from the Appalachian region where she grew up. Ford's "Home Fried Tales," folktale adaptations, spooky tales, and original stories rooted in her family's multicultural storytelling traditions, will be featured at the 2 p.m. June 3 program.

Bil Lepp, a champion "liar" spinning humorous, family-friendly tall tales and stories, will be featured at the 7 p.m. June 3 show with a story commissioned for Flatwater Tales, "'I Guess Ol' John Wasn't Crazy After All: John Hendrix, the Prophet of Oak Ridge."

Pinnacle Financial Partners is sponsoring the John Hendrix story by Lepp, a five-time veteran of the festival. Lepp is creating a tale about the farmer who reportedly spent 40 days and nights in the woods before emerging to reveal visions about the future of land that would become Oak Ridge, built to support World War II in the 1940s. To research the story, Lepp is exploring the internet and reading Oak Ridge historian Ray Smith's book of "Historically Speaking" columns on John Hendrix.

Lepp's the host of the History Channel's "Man v. History" and a five-time champion of the West Virginia Liar's Contest, an honor that led him to his storytelling career. All three storytellers are appearing at this

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year at the International Storytelling Center's Storytelling Live performance series from May through October in Jonesborough, Tenn.

Presenting sponsor of the Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival is Consolidated Nuclear Security, LLC, which manages and operates the Y-12 National Security Complex.

Flatwater Tales shows will be 7 p.m. Friday, June 2, at 10 a.m. for a Family Show on Saturday June 3, and at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. June 3. The three storytellers will each perform different stories at each show. Tickets are \$15 for adults and \$5 for children for each show, except for the June 3 Family Show at 10 a.m. Tickets for that show are \$10 for adults and \$5 for children.

Tickets are now on sale at [Eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com), or www.flatwatertales.com or in person at The Ferrell Shop, 235 Jackson Square, Oak Ridge (cash or check only). Those interested in attending can take advantage of an early bird special and get a discount when they buy tickets for \$25 per person for both the afternoon and evening shows on Saturday, June 3.

Touching Hearts and Minds

"Storytelling touches the child's heart in each of us. It brings back memories, encourages people to ask questions at home sometimes, stories only their family could tell them. There is something for everyone in stories," Ford said.

"If someone comes and listens to a story, they feel a connection to the teller and the people around them. It will touch their hearts as well as their minds," she said.

Each of the three storytellers began honing their art as children. Ford, Jones, and Lepp listened to family stories, fables or tall tales, or to songs and music that inspired them, unaware of the profession that awaited them. They weave their own experiences as children, and adults, into their own stories.

Ford heard a lot of folk tales from her family as a child, about rabbit, bear, fox, and turtle, "those critter tales," while growing up in western Pennsylvania's Appalachian region. Her Dad told a lot of spooky stories, which were her favorite. She, in turn, told stories to her children, who volunteered her to tell stories in their classrooms.

"My mind and heart were filled with stories from my family's oral tradition, but storytelling as a career hadn't occurred to me," Ford wrote in describing breaking into storytelling. Teachers spread the word about her storytelling skills. Research, attending storyteller performances, and joining organizations like O.O.P.S! (Ohio Order for Preservation of Storytelling) helped her find her footing as a professional storyteller who is now nationally known.

A preschool teacher and language arts tutor when her children brought her into their classrooms, Ford sees a connection between the oral tradition and core reading and writing skills. Her writings about storytelling in the classroom are included in resources for educators and in a book she and her friend, Sherry Norfolk, wrote, "Storytelling Strategies for Reaching and Teaching Children with Special Needs." She and Norfolk have also written a storytelling resource for peace workers, "Speak Peace."

"We are not born reading and writing. We are born trying to speak and learning to listen. By starting with the spoken word, I not only encourage the skills needed in communication, I encourage some thought about how sentences are put together, descriptive words and phrases, how to make what you are sharing interesting to others," said Ford, a teaching artist with the Ohio Alliance for Arts Education and a Thurber House mentor for young authors.

For Lepp, the West Virginia Liars' Contest propelled him into storytelling, after hearing and telling tall tales as a child at the dinner table.

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"Everybody in my family was always telling stories," Lepp said. "It was always up to the listener to decide what was true. You could embellish it any way you wanted to. There was a lot of exaggeration, a lot of tales around the dinner table."

"With Lepp, the sorry, low-down lie becomes a grand and glorious creation, a verbal sculpture in which a hundred small fibs, stretchers, falsehoods and prevarications are piled together, shaped and molded into one stunning, awe-inspiring cathedral of flapdoodle and bull," Bob Wells wrote of Lepp in Duke Divinity magazine. Lepp's children's books and audio collections have won numerous awards, including the PEN/Steven Kroll Award and Parents' Choice awards.

For Jones, who weaves music into his stories, his grandmother and her eclectic taste in music played a large role.

"I grew up in Detroit. Early on, my grandmother gave me this love of music. That doesn't extend to just black music. I love Willy Nelson. I love Dolly Parton and George Jones," Jones said. "She had this ridiculous Magnavox stereo with huge speakers. We didn't have CDs. We had albums. She'd put an album on this overpowered stereo and crank it up. Before you know it, everyone in the neighborhood appreciates her music."

Great storytellers who have passed on also influenced him. One was Gamble Rogers. He would tell amazing funny stories, Jones related, and he was a musician who played guitar. "Being a guitar player, he would lay down the soundtrack for what he was saying," he said.

Described as a "living encyclopedia of blues history," Jones received a Kresge Arts Fellowship for his work in music composition and performance in 2018. He is co-founder of the nonprofit Common Chords, which seeks to build bridges between communities using music, storytelling and art.

Storytellers want people to tell their own stories, Lepp said.

"By telling the stories we tell, it causes people to have memories, and they share stories with people in their lives," Lepp said. Many of his stories are about his life and people he met along the way – teachers, relatives, neighbors. "The more we get to talk about people who might not be remembered, it keeps their memories alive."

Ford said it always amazes her when people tell her they don't have any stories. "Then I ask what did they do as a child, and they tell me a wonderful story," she said.

Jones noted that listeners will see themselves at times in the stories he tells.

"My stories mostly come from family stories and experiences I've had," Jones, an ordained minister and a Baptist preacher, said. "When I present these stories, people from seemingly unrelated backgrounds will say, 'That's how my grandmother was,' or 'That sounds like my uncle, who immigrated from Hungary,' a sort of universal relatability."

"For the most part, not only as Americans, but as humans, we have way more in common than we have to fight about," Jones added. At the heart of his stories is the message that we should celebrate our differences. Without them, he said, "Life would be pretty dull."

Workshops

Two special workshops will be offered preceding the performances.

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On Thursday, June 1, Ford will lead a workshop from 12:30-3:30 p.m. on "Collecting Family Stories: Gathering and Creating Spoken and Written Narratives."

On Friday, June 2, Jones will lead a workshop from 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. on "Celebrating Diversity: Music and Stories to Build Bridges." Both workshops will be held at the University of Tennessee Arboretum auditorium, 901 S. Illinois Ave., Oak Ridge. Each workshop is \$50 per person. Please register on Eventbrite for these workshops.

Oak Ridge Driving Tour

As a special, free feature of the festival, Oak Ridge City Historian Ray Smith will again offer a driving tour of Oak Ridge at 1 p.m. Friday, June 2, beginning and ending at the Grove Theater parking lot. Please register on Eventbrite for this free tour.

The tour will include a visit to John Hendrix's grave and stops at The Alexander Guest House lobby, the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, the Secret City Commemorative Walk, and the Scarboro Community Center. Driving portions of the tour will feature Jackson Square and the east portion of the Oak Ridge Historic District.

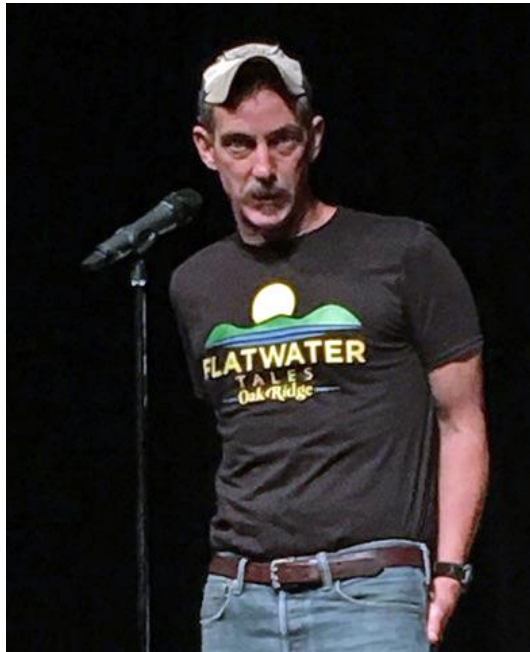
For more information or to purchase tickets, use the following QR code that links to www.flatwatertales.com:



Thanks, Kay, for a thorough review of what folks can expect who come and enjoy this amazing storytelling festival. In just a few years Oak Ridge's very own Flatwater Tales Storytelling Festival has become one of the more successful and enlightening experiences of the growing storytelling phenomena which resonates with all who participate...laugh by laugh and story by story.

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Bil Lepp



Lyn Ford

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Rev. Robert B. Jones, Sr.