

# William S. Burroughs's East Texas Idyll: Old Wizard Arch in

## *Last Words*

by Rob Johnson

When icicles hang by the wall,  
    And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,  
And Tom bears logs into the hall,  
    And milk comes frozen home in pail;  
When blood is nipp'd, and ways be foul,  
Then nightly sings the staring owl,  
    "Tu-whit, to-who"--  
A merry note,  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

—Shakespeare, *Love's Labor's Lost* V. ii

In March 1997, the final year of his life, William S. Burroughs hopes he can write one more story "before I buy the farm" (*Last* 104). He's rummaging through the "bits and flotsam" of his past (*Last* 96), considers writing a "plague" novel, a novel about the "Grays" (bad-intentioned extraterrestrials), and is fascinated with "evil old men," the ranks of whom, at the end of his life, he humbly aspires to join. *Time-Life-Fortune* and its vast text and image bank keeps recurring in his notes, a metaphor, perhaps, for his own stored life experiences. He recalls a moment from his prolonged and "stormy adolescence" when, in 1948 "or thereabouts" he and Kells Elvins—cotton farmers in the Rio Grande Valley at the time—read a story in *Time* magazine about a "bucktoothed, snarling gunman, who took his pleasure from pistol-whipping bootleggers and cussing out their women folk.' " The story, which Burroughs accurately quotes fifty years after reading it, is actually from the May 2, 1949 issue of *Time*, and is about a county cop in

"Bloody" Harlan County, Kentucky who zealously carries out orders to shut down all the bootleggers; after two years of open warfare, the bootleggers finally shut down the bucktoothed snarler instead, shooting him five times in broad daylight ("Kentucky"), and "nobody had sawed anything, and nobody knowed nothing," as Burroughs puts it (*Last* 96).

The bucktoothed snarling gunman shows up again a few days later in his journals on a list of stories he is considering writing. Burroughs continues to think about the story and finds autobiographical material that helps him realize the story more fully—time he spent in the late 1940's on his east Texas farm, situated on Winters Bayou, midway between Coldspring and New Waverly, Texas, 50 miles north and east of Houston. It's moonshine country, and his neighbor, Arch Ellisor, was a moonshiner, water douser, and a real character still remembered today in San Jacinto County. When the Feds show up to investigate the killing of the bucktoothed snarler, who else would know the real story, but Old Wizard Arch? They find Arch one morning on his front porch in Pine Valley, where it's heating up to be a sizzler that day . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

East Texas stayed in Burroughs's memory, right up to the end, as the final journals collected in *Last Words* (2000) show. He and Joan and Julie and (later) Billy, Burroughs's only child and a native Texan, lived there from 1946-1948 on 99 acres bordering a bayou in an old but stolid wooden house weather-beaten to a silvery shine in the moonlight. It was familiar country to Burroughs, reminding him of the Missouri of

his youth: "It was heavy timber. Oak and Persimmon, not too much pine. The kind of country that starts in Southern Missouri and goes all the way down to east Texas. There were raccoons and foxes and squirrels and armadilloes" (Tytell 250-251). The place fit Burroughs's description of the perfect set-up described to Andrew Bockris decades later: "a country place: a fishpond, hunting and shooting, long walks" (231). Burroughs lived there nearly two years, and it's pretty clear he never liked living anywhere else any better.

Although there are more pines and less hardwoods now, Burroughs's neck of east Texas is remarkably unchanged since the days he would drive his Jeep up from Houston on old Hwy 75 (now Interstate 45): just a few miles off the interstate, it's still isolated country populated by the same people whose names appear in Burroughs's works—Hoots, Ellisors, and Gilleys. Burroughs was so certain they would never see his work (and they haven't) that he didn't even bother to change the names of the guilty. In the 1940's, when Billy lived near there, New Waverly was a one-street town with just a few businesses, set back about a mile off Hwy 75. You drove past a hardware store and other small-town businesses, including West's Drug Store (which is still standing, although abandoned), where Burroughs could buy his paregoric and Joan her Benzedrine (Bartee). Apparently, though, Bill and Joan "burned down" West's pretty quickly. In *Naked Lunch*, the County Clerk (based on the County Clerk of San Jacinto County) hears from "Doc" about desperate types like Bill and Joan looking for drugs: "Well," Doc says, "there was a feller in here this morning. City feller. Dressed kind a flashy. So he's got him a Rx for a mason jar of morphine . . . Kinda funny looking prescription writ out on toiler paper . . . And I told him straight out: 'Mister, I suspect you to be a dope fiend.' " (144-145). The

Doc eventually does give over the drugs, but it's Saniflush. (Burroughs and Joan bought their "supplies" in Houston.).

From West's Drug Store in New Waverly to Winters Bayou, a two lane, macadam road wound through heavily wooded, rolling hill country, where a clearing gave occasional glimpses of idyllic pastureland, cotton fields, or a country house. Poor blacks lived in smaller houses by the roadside. Before crossing Winters Bayou, near the County Line between Walker County and San Jacinto County, you passed a small general store run by the nephew of one of Burroughs's neighbors, Arch Ellisor.<sup>1</sup> Burroughs would spend time at this store listening to cracker-barrel stories told by Andrew Ellisor and Arch. Did you ever hear about old Ma Lottie, who kept her dead daughter's body in her house back in the swamps for ten years before it was discovered? Or about the cattle rustler who was killed by a falling tree when he passed out drunk and his campfire burned through the tree and toppled it? Such stories later became the background to "The Coldspring News" and were the seed material for *The Place of Dead Roads*, one of whose characters was originally called "Arch," probably after Arch Ellisor.

Past the store, you made a left onto a rutted dirt road leading to the small, backwoods settlement known as "Pine Valley," situated along a bayou (or creek) called Winters Bayou. Most of the trees at this time were still hardwoods (pin oak, hickory, and elm), but that generation of the 1940s in east Texas considered hardwoods a nuisance, and they cleared them to make room for the more commercially viable pine trees, which are used for paper pulp and lumber. When Burroughs bought his 99 acres in 1946, a man by the name of Frank Hill Elmore had previously negotiated the rights to the hardwoods on Bill's property and "thinned out" Bill's swamp for him ("General").

At the end of this country road, and across a small bridge, Burroughs often had to park his jeep and walk the rest of the way to the aging farmhouse situated on his 99 acres of Pine Valley. The land sloped gently down to the bayou, where the Burroughs family and guests could bathe and fish. You can get to it, if you want to, by walking north along Winters Bayou, but wear some high boots: there are lots of snakes. This swampy, bayou land, with its looming cypress trees covered by Spanish moss, inspired passages like this one in *Naked Lunch*: "And Old Ma Lottie . . . wakes shivering in the East Texas dawn . . . vultures out over the black swamp water and cypress stumps" (72).

Even today, this part of East Texas is isolated, with cell phone reception pretty iffy in the nearby town (and county seat) of Coldspring. Burroughs was at least a mile from his nearest neighbor, providing him the kind of isolation his radically individualistic spirit desired. It was so isolated in the 1930's, that when the local Constable, John Clay Ellisor ("nothing in this patch of pines but owls. Hoots and Ellisors . . . [*Last* 109]) responded to a crime report somewhere off Winters Bayou, it would often take him a day to get out there by mule and another day to get back.<sup>2</sup> This kind of isolation was just what the Burroughses were looking for. Joan, who was decidedly "bohemian" and a precursor of the hippy chicks of the 1960s and 1970s, was right at home there in nowhere. In south Texas, where they had originally bought farmland, she and Bill had been in with Kells Elvins's McAllen Country Club crowd, but Joan wasn't interested in polishing her nails over conversations with Valley socialites (Huncke 262). In east Texas, she didn't have to socialize with anyone but Bill and their select friends they invited to the ranch, such as Herbert Huncke, Allen Ginsberg, and Neal Cassady.

Huncke's excellent accounts of his days spent on the "ranch" are well-known, but Ginsberg's are not of much use: his east Texas letters and journals are all about his unrequited love for Neal Cassady and could have been written anywhere. Allen arrives in Texas in late August of 1947 "expecting this happy holiday of God given sexuality" — with Neal Cassady. But it doesn't happen. The group dynamic—Neal, Bill, Joan, Herbert, Allen—prevents Allen from openly showing his affection for Neal. "So here I was: the first day high on tea, lushed, at supper watching Neal orient and try to dig Joan and Bill," he writes. Allen strokes and pets Neal "unconsciously," he says, but the "subject" is "tactfully omitted from open expression." He sees himself as "the youngsters against the old frigid witch [Joan]". He longs to tell Neal, but can only write it instead, that "as to sex in Texas, that animal kicks—ass fucking and so forth, frenzy, is better than apathy and drift--will pleasure him more perhaps." All in all, it is not the "happy forest of Arden" he had hoped for (Ginsberg 226-228). The next time he is in Texas, en route to New York City from Mexico City, it is September of 1951 and his car has broken down in Galveston, Texas. He picks up the September 7, 1951 copy of the *Galveston Daily News* and a headline reads that William S. Burroughs, heir to the Burroughs adding machine fortune, has shot his wife in a game of William Tell down in Mexico (Schumacher 137).

Cassady never wrote a full account of east Texas (There are a few pertinent letters.), but Jack Kerouac, fueling Neal with pot and wine, slyly wheedled out a fairly coherent description of Neal and Bill's east Texas days in the "Tape" section of *Visions of Cody*. Bill is playing out his idea of how a country gentleman lives, albeit, one with little money, a slight habit, a wife addicted to Benzedrine, and whose crops consist of a small

stand of marijuana and some dying opium poppies. The typical day on the ranch is this: Bill rises just before noon, finds Joan cooking breakfast in the kitchen, opens a copy of the *San Jacinto News-Times* and says something typical to Joan over the paper such as it looks like Peaches Brown is getting another divorce, dear, to which she replies, "Yeah, yeah." Herbert Huncke's out looking for firewood; he's always out looking for firewood to cook the steaks that night. Neal's gone to check the mail because he knows Bill will ask. No, the mail's not there yet.

They spend a lot of time reading—all 1000 pages of *Inside U.S.A.*, Mezz Mezzrow's *Really the Blues*—high on pot or Nembies or Benzedrine, "blasting" sodas (cases of Coke and Seven Up), plus liquor—gin, tequila, rum. They drink the county dry and have to go into Houston to re-stock. There's always music going: Bill prefers Viennese waltzes, a strange sound to be heard hanging in the air with Spanish moss, but Huncke loves Billy Holliday, who is more at home in the swamps. She's the soundtrack one day as they sit on the front porch, at the opposite end from where Joan does the washing in big tubs, and Bill picks up the rifle off his lap. He aims and shoots at an old rotten tree trunk fifty yards away. Too late he sees a horse standing behind it, which tears across the pasture at the sound of the gun. Bill thinks he's shot the horse but luckily hasn't: He can't see anything through his glasses. A month later he nearly kills Neal and Huncke while driving their load of pot up to New York, slamming on the breaks like an old lady and pulling over whenever a car or anything else was within fifty feet of his bumper. No wonder he missed the glass and hit Joan with that bullet in Mexico . . .<sup>3</sup>

Bill likes to shoot. So much so the neighbors think there's gangsters hiding out in the swamps shooting off their guns for practice. One day Herbert Huncke directs Bill to

shoot an armadillo, which he does. Guilty of everything, Huncke says a prayer over the animal (Huncke 260). Another east Texas animal story: In Conroe, while Joan is giving birth to Billy III, Bill steps out to get a snort from a bottle stashed in his Jeep parked in the hospital parking lot. Someone has left a puppy in the back seat. Bill abandons it, and to his last day, feels regret about that whining puppy in Conroe (*Last* 66).

They also fish, but don't know what the hell they are doing. There's big catfish in the bayou if you can catch them. The muddy water is perfect for these prehistoric fish, and in the light puddling through the leaves, it's even beautiful on Winters Bayou: go there and see for yourself the hanging moss, cedars, and hibiscus. When they bathe in the bayou the fish bite them, leaving little welts. No one wants to bathe next to Herbert, who has a skin rash Neal calls the "fungus bungus."

Neal lives happily like this for a month. On Sept. 20, 1947 he goes to see the Sam Houston Bearkats play the Louisiana State Wildcats (Bearkats win 14-0) and to eyeball the high school girls in Huntsville (Cassady 53). Huntsville is where the state prison is located. Burroughs's friend Kells Elvins had spent a year and a half there (April 1939 to November 1940) as a prison psychologist and based his MA thesis on his study of 44 "Incestuous White Fathers of Texas." When the Warden in Huntsville read the thesis, he told Elvins, "Texas fathers aren't like that," and fired him.<sup>4</sup>

The only drawback to Neal's time in east Texas is that Joan, inexplicably, doesn't like him-- Joan, who exists in these stories only in the background, washing laundry on the front porch, or cooking for the men great heaping meals of corn on the cob, sweet potatoes, peas, and peaches, a pretty fair menu for a cook whose appetite is suppressed by three Benzedrine tubes a day (Cassady 51). Now and then she gets in a word edgewise,



calling Texas the "beatest state in the union," for example. She's also the source of the best Arch Ellisor story, told to Allen Ginsberg who tells it to Jack who tells it Neal in order to try to get Neal to remember it, but he really doesn't (Jack putting the words in Neal's mouth, a familiar routine for him, Neal letting him have his fun).

So old Arch has eyes like Little Orphan Annie's and Bill's previously invited him out to "witch" a water well for him. He doesn't use a dousing wand, he uses a dousing twig, which he balances on his finger, and when it falls off, there's water. Proof of his mystical affinity for water comes one day when they are all high, bad order high, and sitting in the house and Arch walks in the door just at the moment, when, out of clear skies, a rainstorm rips loose. It's all remembered in comic book terms: Arch is like the character in L'il Abner who brings a rainstorm with him everywhere he goes. Did I mention they were all high? (Kerouac 121-122).

Old Wizard Arch.

Fifty years after the rainstorm episode, Burroughs writes what is really his last complete story, although you have to piece it together from various entries in his journal (beginning March 9, 1997) and eliminate the repetitions for it to have beginning, middle and end. Its hero is Arch Ellisor. There's moonshine, incest, fiddle playing. The back story is the murder of the Bucktooth Snarler, pistol-whipper of bootleggers and insulter of their women, and Burroughs turns Kentucky into East Texas. The Feds show up investigating the murder of the lawman by the bootleggers and are steered out to Old Arch's place. He lives on the land where old Clem Higgins died in a sheep dip, killed by his fourteen year old daughter he'd been raping for years, who jumps up and down on him in the sheep dip simulating sex and drowning him. The Feds introduce themselves, and

Arch tells them, "Well now, I sorta steer folks the way they wanta go. Like someone comes here wants some action, comes to Old Arch" (*Last Words* 118). When they ask him what he knows about the death of the Bucktooth Snarler, though, Arch refuses to help, sitting on his front porch calmly drinking corn from a mason jar. They wave the Witness Protection Act in front of his face and tell him stories of what happens to old men in prison--they even offer him indoor plumbing! But no hero in a Burroughs story is a stool pigeon. Later on, as the agents are driving away, Arch plays his magic fiddle and causes their car to crash, killing both agents: "Faster faster round and round/swing your partner offen the ground/Faster faster round and round" (*Last* 137).<sup>5</sup>

In one alternative ending to the story, Burroughs plays the immortality act. "Arch is shedding his old-man suit and dances out in the goat skin as Boujeloud of the Bacchanal, with his flare" (*Last* 118). Boujelod is Pan, god of pastoral merriment, who must have been there with them in east Texas. Still, Burroughs is anything but sentimental about these memories he associates with his idyll in the east Texas woods. A few months before he dies, he sees his desires mixed up with loss, and he sees the price you pay trading your life for routines: "Bits and flotsam of my past—all dreary, inept, always way below my level. At 83 just emerging from a stormy adolescence, costly to myself and those around me" (*Last* 96).

Everybody pays the fiddler.

### Notes

1. Information on Andrew's store comes from an August 2007 interview with San Jacinto County Constable Ken Hammond. Hammond's grandfather was Arch Ellisor's cousin. Information on the Ellisor family's moonshine business also comes from Hammond,

although he wasn't sure which Ellisor had the still. With a laugh, Hammond said that Burroughs, as a "criminal", would have "fit right in" East Texas

2. Information from Hammond (see note 1).

3. The description of east Texas life here is paraphrased from pages 119-143 of *Visions of Cody* (part of the "Tape" section).

4. Ted Marak told me about the warden firing Kells (he heard it from Kells himself) in an interview I conducted with him in 2003 for my book *The Lost Years of William S. Burroughs: Beats in South Texas* (Texas A and M University Press, 2006).

5. The story of Old Wizard Arch can be constructed from the following pages in *Last Words*: 108-111; 116-122; 137.

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