A life of kindness

Hometown Ramblings

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Contributing Columnist



Many of us of a certain age have been touched by the loss of several prominent individuals in recent weeks. As a baby boomer myself, their passing has prompted me to pause and reflect. The life of Dolly Parton and stories of her generosity abound in news reports across all forms of media. From the jobs created at Dollywood and the million-dollar gift to Vanderbilt University Medical Center during the pandemic, to her dedication to the Imagination Library, giving books to children around the world. She was, without question, a force for good.

As a child, I watched "The Porter Wagoner Show" each week, and I was immediately drawn to 26-year-old "Miss Dolly." Maybe it was her familiar Tennessee twang, but she became my favorite singer, and I thought she was pretty. Most of all, she always seemed happy. When I discovered that she was coming to the Calloway County Fair in 1968, I'm sure I could talk of nothing else for weeks on end.

I don't recall much about the night other than Dolly had a "tummy bug" and would only sing if she felt up to it. Porter and his band played an extra half hour to make up for her not being able to perform. As it worked out, she did come on stage toward the end of the concert, just as beautiful in person as she was on TV. She didn't want to disappoint the 5,000 fans who showed up to see her, and did her best despite not feeling well.

That little memory surfaced again as her kindness and generosity were celebrated across the world. There was a sincerity about her, a genuineness that seemed to resonate with everyone.

Within a few days of her passing, another legendary figure I admire also passed away. Wendell Berry was an inspiration to me. I only had one personal encounter with him, but I cherish the memory.

Back in 2010, when I was beginning to write stories about my family and our ten-generation tobacco farm family, I reached out to the renowned author and poet. It wasn't on a whim. I knew his passion for agriculture and his love for family farms and rural communities. Though we'd never met, I felt a kindred spirit with him.

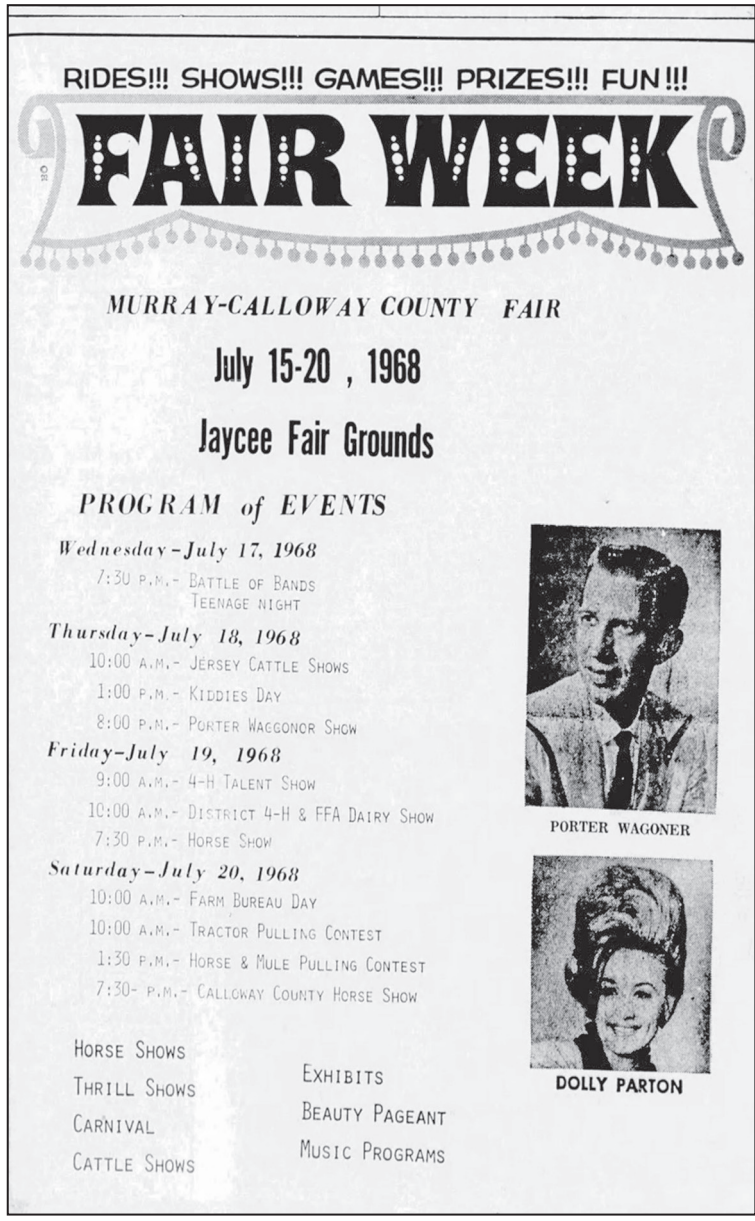
I was new to the inner workings of Kentucky's literary scene, and I had no idea how to go about getting his attention. So, I wrote him a letter and asked if he would provide a recommendation for the jacket cover of my first book. I was naïve but hoped for his endorsement.

As busy as I am sure he was, he took the time to write me a personal note. He went a step further and offered to let me use a passage from one of his books instead of a blurb. It was thoughtful, gracious, and accommodating. Simply put, it was very kind.

Dolly's generosity has been lauded worldwide. While perhaps a bit less known, Mr. Berry's contributions deserve equal praise. His advocacy for the care of our land and natural resources, while challenging to some, has been critically important. He saw the land as something we are to steward and our communities a place of belonging – being in covenant with one another. His words shaped conversations that mattered, and his concern for future generations reached far beyond his own work.

As I reflected on these two widely known individuals, I realized why their lives made such an impact on me. They cared deeply about their families, and their roots were planted deep in places they loved. They never lost sight of who they were or where they came from. And they were champions for making life better for others. These ideals were practiced over many years of life and experiences.

I believe Miss Dolly and Mr. Wendell made the effort to be kind. I think they tried to live by the lessons they learned, and it showed in the way they treated others. If their lives teach us anything, it's that ordinary kindness can change the world. May their memory inspire us to be faithful stewards of our words, our land,



Murray Ledger & Times Archives

This advertisement for a Porter Wagoner/Dolly Parton concert at the 1968 Murray-Calloway County Fair ran in the Ledger & Times on July 17, 1968. Wynema Brown said it was the first concert for her then-4-year-old son, television and film actor W. Earl Brown, who has since attended hundreds of shows featuring multiple music genres.