

Buzzy's Story...

An Interview with Billie Sargent

Over the years I've been attending January Adventures (JA), founder Buzzy Pickren and what his story could possibly be were mysteries which intrigued me. I knew Buzzy by sight, but who was this man who spoke quietly and necessary things happened at the January Adventure seminar? Why does he stay in the shadows when he is the star player? What moved him to start January Adventure? And, finally, how does he find the wonderful speakers and attract six hundred people to come to this tucked-away island year after year? And how, for goodness sakes, did he get the name "Buzzy"?

Not that I wanted to intrude on his privacy, but, really!

When I joined JA's staff and began to play a part in its Face Book page rejuvenation, I thought others might be curious, too, so I asked the Chief of JA State, Buzzy Pickren, for an interview. And he said, reluctantly, okay.

We met one Sunday afternoon following the 2016 January Adventure at his house, overlooking St. Simons Sound. And the words that follow comprise the comprise what I learned about the man and the people who made JA what it is today.

->Billie: In the Beginning?

->Buzzy: I was born as the Great Depression was bottoming out on February 9, 1933, in Argyle, Georgia, on the northern edge of the Okefenokee Swamp. Within a few weeks, FDR moved into the White House with, among others, his grandchildren: "Buzzy" and "Sistie" Dall. My sister, Annette, and I, being fairly close in age to the Dall children were bestowed with those nicknames. "Sistie" did not last long for Annette, but I have been "Buzzy" for 83 years. My legal and christening name is Lovett Bennet Pickren.

An Aside from Billie: The Okefenokee is a mystical place. Where Buzzy grew up in Argyle is 'way at the western tip of the swamp -- truly a wilderness. Today guides take folks into the swamp in small boats...the boats winding their way through towering cypress trees filled with Spanish moss and exotic birds. Alligators are here and there

along the way, checking for the boat's intentions. This is truly an experience not to be missed while visiting this area.

This is the background for Buzzy's early years. The culture there was/is unique, and Buzzy captures it perfectly in his book *Pine Woods Stories -- 1914-1949*.

Now, back to Buzzy's story:

->Billie: What was it like to grow up in Argyle?

->Buzzy: Well, RC's (12-ounce Royal Crown Colas) were a nickel each, Silver Bells (now Kisses) were five for a penny, and you paid fourteen cents to see the picture show in the nearby metropolis of Homerville. It was always a cowboy movie with a comedy and serial.

But getting your hands on a nickel or dime took a little doing. I remember my Mama saying some years later that we didn't have any money and nobody else did either. I think I always had shoes, even if sometimes they were hand-me-downs from my sister. But when I was in the first, second and third grades, some of my classmates came to school barefooted all winter.

-> Billie: Did Argyle have a school?

->Buzzy: Yes, and it was a good one. First and second grade in one room; third, fourth and fifth in another; and sixth and seventh in the one by the front door. The lady who taught those last two grades put enough English grammar in my head to get me accepted at Georgia Tech. And the principal of the high school in Homerville, the county seat, did the same for me with mathematics.

->Billie: What about the military?

->Buzzy: My dad was working for the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Unit of the Internal Revenue Service in Atlanta by the time I got there to attend the North Avenue Trade School (aka Georgia Tech), and we had a little more money, but not enough to cover my college expenses. I managed to get selected for the NROTC scholarship program which obligated me to serve in the Navy for three years after graduation.

I was commissioned Ensign an hour after I got my diploma. I reported to flight school in Pensacola the next day. With my gold wings pinned to my tunic, I reported to my squadron for an eight-month tour in the Mediterranean.

I flew AD-6 dive bombers. Duty in the Med with romantic environs like the Riviera and Napoli was mesmerizing, but alas, I had left Mary Lula, my wife and sweetheart since the fourth grade, behind with our first born, Laurie, and soon-to-be-delivered-Tom, our first son.

->Billie: So you didn't stay in the Navy.

->Buzzy: No, I worked as an engineer for the paper mill in St. Marys (30 miles south from St. Simons Island) for three years. Our second son, Jim, came along before we moved to St. Simons Island, Georgia, in 1962. For the next 25 or so years, I traveled an area from Macon to Miami to Mobile selling industrial equipment. In 1989, I built Saint Simons Inn by the Lighthouse, and managed it for about 15 years. Mary Lula died in January, 2000, and I was adrift in many ways. But my life turned around when I found Joyce. We married in 2012.

->Billie: We need to talk about religion.

->Buzzy: I've been a pretty good Methodist all my life, but not one who could stand in a testimony meeting and recount the details of my salvation. I had worked pretty hard at doing good and the right thing, but the party line was "Good works won't get you into heaven -- you have to *believe*."

I desperately needed a new paradigm.

Under the influence of John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg and a few others, I caught a glimpse of another way. At Ring Lake Ranch, Wyoming, after two weeks of Marcus Borg lectures in 2001, I felt like the tent meeting preacher who would say, "God has put it on my heart." Whether it was God or indigestion that put it there, I wanted to bring some of that "Emerging Christianity" of Borg and Crossan back to the Bible belt.

I approached Marcus with that idea, and January Adventure in Emerging Christianity was conceived.

->Billie: What was the gestation period for JA in EC?

->Buzzy: Marcus Borg was the godfather and Reverend Carl Vorpe joined me as a sponsor. Carl and I asked for and received the blessing of the bishop of the South Georgia Methodist Conference. And with that blessing, we approached the inn-keeper of the Methodist facility, Epworth by the Sea on St. Simons. He had room for JA on

Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend in January, 2005. About 240 souls witnessed the birthing as Marcus and Rev. Will Willimon presented.

Carl retired with health problems in the fourth year of JA, and R.C. Johnson came on board as Mister Do-It-All. He was a dynamo and best friend to me and the program. R.C. died in his sleep in 2014, but he had ushered in many capacity crowds and left us with one of the two or three best comments ever regarding January Adventure.

There were some latter-day Pharisees who have expressed the opinion that JA should not be allowed on Methodist property. To which R.C. commented, "They're afraid there's thinking going on over there!"

->**Billie:** Is there an epilog?

Buzzy: Yes, and you, Ms. Billie Sargent, and Peter McCall are it. Billie is our new moderator and Peter is our webmaster and resident computer dude. Billie is set to take over JA when I can't reach the pedals anymore. I was reminded of that urgency by a comment on one of the 2016 JA questionnaires, "Buzzy is not immortal -- get on it."

My beautiful wife Joyce and I live overlooking Saint Simons Sound.

"With a step I will stand on the firm-packed sand
That borders a world of sea."