The Ludowici Trap

BY TOM ZOELLNER

The village of Ludowici, in the deep piney lowlands of southeast Georgia, got its name from a German fellow who came there in 1904 to manufacture clay roof tiles. But it was not his accomplishments that made the town famous. Rather, it took thousands of inhospitable acts toward thousands of out-of-town visitors to put Ludowici on the map—to give it a national reputation as one of the most venomous of a particular breed of Southern hamlet. In short: Ludowici was a classic speed trap.

Yankee snowbirds were routinely nailed by, among other things, a twin set of rubber hoses laid out in the road near Harley Odom’s hog pen, not far from the place where the speed limit plunged suddenly to 25 miles per hour. This ’50s-era device was called a “speed watch” or, appropriately enough, a “speed trap,” and it worked a bit like the bell-ringing hoses that used to lie like snakes outside gas stations. A stop-watch would clock the tires’ first strike, then the second, and then report the car’s speed for a motorcycle cop waiting behind a billboard. And in Ludowici, the speed watch always seemed to be calibrated funny.

The one traffic light in the center of town also had a habit of unexpectedly flashing from green to red—skipping yellow altogether—while cops lurked nearby. Rumor had it that the light was connected via remote switch to a desk in the second-story office of a bus station, where a local stooge sat waiting to push the button and catch yet another driver. The fast-changing “Ludowici light” was known all over the South and became the subject of more complaints to the American Automobile Association than any other traffic signal in the country. Time magazine called it “a magic lamp” in 1959 and noted that it brought in a quarter of the town’s $15,000 annual income. That was just the revenue that made it onto the books.

Courthouse thugs like Dawson derived their power from Georgia’s antiquated “county unit” system, in which even the smallest county in the state was guaranteed a seat in the General Assembly, diluting and disempowering the growing urban concentrations of blacks. (This is why Georgia has 159 counties even today, second only to Texas.) Some of the counties arguably never should have been created in the first place, like Long County, home of Ludowici, which was hastily carved out in 1920 and named for the first surgeon in the world to use anesthesia. Nothing much ever grew there except old trees and Spanish moss and a few marginal fields of tobacco and corn; water quickly seeped into any holes dug in the sandy soil. As the Long County seat, Ludowici had a population of barely 1,500 people in its prime, though, like Georgia’s other rotten boroughs, it still commanded outsized power for its ability to deliver votes to the Democratic machine in Atlanta, and rural despots could run things as they pleased. “Votes often are sold for a dollar and a slug of stump rum,” noted Harper’s writer Calvin Kytle in 1948. “The dead and insane are voted, returns frequently are not counted at all but concocted.”

There was another force that kept the speed traps running, according to historian Tammy Ingram, author of Dixie Highway: Roadbuilding
and the Making of the Modern South, 1900–1930.
“Roads were funded locally and people resented those just passing through,” she said. “There was tension between the locals and the tourists from the start.”

The idea of country cousins scoring a victory over rich New Yorkers in their fancy cars also tapped into a body of “trickster” mythology common to both black and white Southerners; the charming rogue who occupies a subservient position, but still manages to put one over on the hypocritical overseer. Jimmy Smith, a local political observer who knew Ralph Dawson, put it this way: “It’s one of the poorest areas of the country, and here are all these Packards and Cadillacs coming through, and well . . . a man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.”

I went to Ludowici to visit with Price Chapman, Jr., the son of the man who built the town’s now-razed bus station, where the button that switched the traffic light from green to red was supposed to have been hidden. Chapman denied a switch was located there (though he acknowledged there had been slot machines in the basement). He took me around on a mini-tour of the town’s historic roadside skullduggery, showing me the weathered billboard that used to shield the motorcycle cops from view, the stretch of road where the rubber hoses were laid, and the diagonal street that locals could use to avoid the infamous flashing light. Chapman is a good-humored man and pillar of the Jones Creek Baptist Church—he didn’t fleece any snowbirds himself. But he could recall the sense of righteous justification in the air back then.

“It was wrong what we did, but there’s a big cultural thing in this city between North and South, and they thought it was the right thing to do if they could put one over,” he told me. “It was the victory of the Southern mind over Yankee engineering . . . but that was just an excuse to pick people’s pockets.”

Another irony lurks behind the billboard. Evidence shows that speed traps don’t make roads even marginally safer. Instead, they create more red asphalt.

“If Lester Maddox can do it, so can I,” Commissioner Jeff Utley bragged to the Savannah Morning News. Oliver’s police chief responded that he was unimpressed with the billboard—and with local drivers. “We don’t hide,” said the chief. “We always sit in the same spot. I can’t help it that he’s an idiot.”

There seems to be something tantalizing about U.S. Route 301 that brings out the worst in local governments. Approximately 142 miles down the road from Ludowici is the barely-there town of Hampton, Florida, which annexed about a thousand feet of the road in the early 1990s, hired a squad of cops with radar guns, and walked away with a quarter-million dollars in annual ticket revenue. Things didn’t end well. The mayor went to jail for allegedly dealing oxycodone and the Florida legislature threatened to dissolve the town’s charter. And just a few miles off 301 to the north is the speck of Oliver, Georgia, which has an unusually aggressive police department. In 2010, a politician from a neighboring county erected a vengeful billboard at the border: DON’T GET CAUGHT IN A SPEED TRAP.

“Under Arrest” by Anna Dykema, www.annadykemaphotography.com