WHY DO THEY HATE US?

We walk to the garage, where two pale faces, one skeletal and one round, glow from the gloom of a cave-like service bay. The ground around us is carpeted with little toothed metal disks, bolts, nuts, doohickeys, glittering blackly. The gaunt face lifts its chin, directing me to the man walking our way, and I am ushered inside the building with the hand-painted sign proclaiming "Bible & Tire."

We were just east of Morehead, Ky., when my husband and I had spotted Bible & Tire. Bibles are a seasonal business, owner Garrett Dehart now tells me, and this isn't the season, so stock is low, although given the weather - it's a preview of hell, with temperatures pushing 100 degrees - a little wise promotion might goose a sinner or two toward scripture.

Dehart says he took up his calling not long after his marriage ended. That was 20 years ago. "I had lost everything," he says. "I was home - you probably won't believe this . . ." He stops to look through me with Frank Sinatra-blue eyes.

"I'll believe it," I promise.

He continues. "One day I heard a voice on the couch: 'Come down and lease this garage.'" He says he drove right over. But the owner had not heard the same instruction, requiring the Lord to send Dehart again. This time, heavenly communications were clearer. Eventually Dehart bought the place. Now Bible & Tire is just what the sign says: It sells tires; it sells bibles. And Dehart occasionally gives bibles away.
It is his mission. Yet I, too, have a mission. A misbegotten mission. Maybe a stupid mission. But it was born of one of the first conversations I had in Louisville, with our mover. The rest of the state, the mover said, hates Louisville. He wouldn't live anywhere else - although he was born a few counties over - and people in the rest of the state wouldn't come here. This hardly seemed credible to me, charmed as I was by my new hometown. Then I ran across an online discussion in which people from all over Kentucky talked trash about Louisville.

"There is a deep-seeded (sic) dislike of Louisville in most of the rural areas of Kentucky," one wrote.

"I've heard from quite a few people outside of Louisville that believe that native Louisvillians tend to seem a little ignorant, narrow-minded and arrogant . . . putting Louisville too high up on a pedestal while at the same time being condescending to other areas."

"Some folks, not naming names, seem to think that if you don't live within 40 or 50 miles of Louisville or Lexington you're just out of touch and likely married to your sister. Additionally, we're uneducated, overreligious, shack-dwelling inbreds and have only poor underachieving schools that only teach about Jesus. We're out of touch, out of date and out at Klan rallies."

Wow, I thought. Is the divide that bad? Are we truly such arrogant jerks? Thus, my mission was born, launching me on a 2,500-mile journey, looking for answers from Pikeville in the east to the farthest western outpost of Madrid Bend.

So I ask Ol' Blue Eyes this question: Why does the rest of the state hate us?

He can't say. In fact, he's never been to Louisville. "I've been to the edge," he says. "There are good people and bad
all over."

This is discouraging. This is actually my second interview, and I'm just not finding the malice I hoped to dissect. A little earlier, I had stopped at Lying Lee's Used Cars in Morehead. A salesman in blue jeans wrapped up a conversation with a customer as I approached. "I'd really like to drive that Chevy," the customer said. I followed the salesman into the office, where he asked a woman if she could find the key. She fetched a plastic container made from the bottom of a gallon milk jug. It was full of unlabeled keys.

In the parking lot, a guy in a black T-shirt whose blond hair stood straight up looked at cars with a cigarette clinging to his lower lip. I asked him what he thought of Louisville. "I hate it," the man said with enough venom to kill a champion steer. This could be good, I thought. I probed more deeply. "Why do you hate it? Why is it so bad?"

"The traffic," he said. "Too many people."

That there is some dislike between Louisville and the rest of the commonwealth seems established fact. There are persistent arguments about who hogs all the money from government - with Louisvillians citing 2003 data showing that the city gets back 59 cents for every dollar in taxes it sends to Frankfort while Glasgow scores $1.16 per dollar paid; Ashland, 87 cents; Mayfield, $1.35; and Frankfort - are you ready for this? - $4.92. Lexington gets 82 cents and the Cincinnati-area counties 64 cents. The rest of the state sees things differently, pointing to Louisville exclusives: a multimillion-dollar bridge project, say, or the Yum! Center.

And then there is that other rivalry. I think it's about basketball. Add to this historical events, geography and disinterest that surpasses even a natural inclination of people who live closer to, say, Nashville or St. Louis to forget Louisville exists. What does it mean when the makers
of Justified, the FX television series set in Kentucky, have mentioned Louisville exactly two times by the end of season two? (Sorry, I'm behind.) The biggest city in the state gets two mentions. In the minds of strangers and stragglers, it seems, Lexington looms larger.

At the Shepherdsville Flea Market ("The Most Awesome Flea Market"), a guy tells me that Lexington is the biggest city in the state. And he lives in Louisville. In fact, Louisville's population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, is just under 600,000; Lexington's is just under 300,000. What's confusing about this?

Oh, a side note: Should you decide to visit the Shepherdsville market, shop inside as well as out. Tell me if they're still offering six-packs of bras amid a display of Jesus T-shirts.

I don't want any. I just want to know.

Traveling Kentucky is like taking a country-western quiz. Quick: Name three songs by Tom T. Hall. We're on the Tom T. Hall Highway, aka U.S. 60 between Morehead and Olive Hill, Hall's birthplace. Our Kentucky journeys will put us on not only the Tom T., but also the Kentucky Country Music Highway (U.S. 23) and the Blue Moon of Kentucky Highway (U.S. 62 in Ohio County). We will note the childhood homes or birthplaces of Loretta Lynn, Crystal Gayle, Bill Monroe, Billy Ray Cyrus, Naomi and Wynonna Judd, Don and Phil Everly, Dwight Yoakam, and Patty Loveless. Oh, and Ricky Skaggs. That we miss many more is testimony to our ignorance of country music and occasional lack of attention.

I can only remember two Tom T. Hall songs, the insipid "I Love" and "Harper Valley PTA," which anyone alive in 1968 has seared upon the brain. Now it's stuck in mine as we drive through the gaudiest of landscapes, with bright green and gold fields against electric-blue skies. If we kept driving
on 60, we would end up in Virginia Beach. Instead, we take a side road, following the signs to Mamaw's Primitives in Squirrel Hollow. Mamaw Verlina Greenhill comes out the front door to meet us. She makes homemade art, not unlike the country decor so popular a few years back. Hers is well-made, clever and bargain-priced, displayed in a barn-shaped shed where lazy wasps drift in the stifling heat.

What does she think of Louisville?

She's never been there.

"I've never been anywhere," she says. "Well, I went to Ohio a few times. But if it's a big town, I don't want anything to do with it. My boy works in Lexington, and it was horrible busy. So much traffic! I was there three hours and I was ready to come back to Squirrel Holler."

Back on U.S. 60, we stop at a business called JTR, where the sign says it sells used "Furinture" and "Appliance." I want to see this appliance, but the store is closed. We end up at the Boyd County Fair, only to learn that the eagerly anticipated lawn-mower races are canceled due to a lack of contestants. So we opt for the wrestling matches, where a man in blue surgical scrubs, a grass skirt and patent-leather boots trades fake body slams with a grappler in a white mask, blond wig and muumuu. I cheer for the muumuu man. Who doesn't love a muumuu?

This is a sweet little fair, slightly smaller than your average Louisville Catholic church carnival. On the midway I ask a group of teenagers about Louisville. Stunned silence. "There are too many drugs in Lexington," one teen finally tells me. (It's noisy. Maybe she didn't hear me.) "Wait! Wait!" a boy interrupts. "I know! The Louisville Slugger! That's a baseball bat!" Finally, Betsy Lane decides she doesn't like Louisville because . . . "it's a city."
James Gifford's dark brown hair falls across his brow probably the same way it did when he was a boy in Tennessee. The historian directs the Jesse Stuart Foundation in Ashland and is author of a new biography of the writer.

Jesse Stuart lived in Greenup County, just up the road from Ashland, and he wrote stories about his neighbors around W Hollow, as well as poems and books that were very popular, especially in the 1940s and '50s. His stories told the people who lived along the Appalachian crest that their lives mattered.

"In the middle of the last century Jesse Stuart was, in my opinion, without a doubt, the most widely read author in America," Gifford says. And he understands why. To Gifford as he was growing up in Tennessee, and to others like him, Dick and Jane were foreigners from a strange world where mothers wore high heels and fathers carried briefcases. Stuart's stories were Gifford's first encounter with literature that reflected his life back to him. "Stuart restored dignity to our culture," Gifford says. "What I find in Stuart is someone who wrote about a way of life I understood and identified with."

Stuart's work helped bridge a gap that separated the world from Appalachia and Appalachia from the world. But those divisions nationally and in the commonwealth run deep, Gifford says, born of the factionalism of the Civil War era and nourished in the years that followed. When he teaches, he devotes a semester to the topic. "First and factually, the people of Appalachia did not receive a proportionate share of funding after the Civil War. That's an easily documentable fact and one reason our area is so poor," he says. As a result, the region lagged in infrastructure, in education and in all the other measures of prosperity.
But even beyond those divisions, Eastern Kentucky is simply a different world. It is rural. It is slower. It is easier. The people who live here prefer all of those things. And Gifford is no exception.

"I feel like I live in a place where being a neighbor means something different than it does in Louisville or Lexington, something more than the house next to yours," he says. "It's more beautiful in spirit than it is in its external. In their heart, these are some of the most beautiful people in the world, dear and sweet and good."

And maybe tanned. Although rural Kentuckians don't seem especially bronzed, tanning salons appear to fuel significant portions of the rural economy, their number, per capita - according to my casual observation - exceeding that of all other visible revenue sources. On the loneliest stretch of county road, one is never far from an opportunity to quick-roast. Take the town of Do Stop, not much more than a crossroads 40 miles west of Elizabethtown. Of the hundreds of Kentucky towns with fanciful names, Do Stop is one of the few that is more than a dot on the map. There is nothing in Eighty-Eight. Monkey's Eyebrow hosts no commerce. Hippo is less than a ghost of whatever spirit prompted people to name it anything. But Do Stop has two tanning salons.

Tammy Bratcher Nash works at the Do Stop gas station/convenience store/tanning emporium. Years ago - probably back in the 1940s - the man who owned the store at this location would stand at the side of the road beseeching passing drivers, "Do stop! Do stop!" Thus, the town was named. Or that's the story Nash was told.

Do Stop may feel like a world away from Louisville, but there are still strong connections to the city. "Half my family lives there," Nash says. I ask Nash's coworker, Esther Logsdon, what she thinks of the city.
"My opinion - are you familiar with Leitchfield? I would rather go to Louisville than go to Leitchfield," Logsdon says. "I think people in Leitchfield are snotty and they look down their nose at people, and I just don't think people should feel that way."

We just came from Leitchfield, about 16 miles east of Do Stop, and although we were asked to leave Sonny's Barber Shop - the only place in the state where people declined to talk to me - everyone else was friendly and chatty, and they generally liked Louisville, even if they are occasionally suspicious of its political reach.

Leitchfield and surrounding Grayson County are proudly Republican, so Democrats make them nervous anyway. "When (Democratic Gov. Steve) Beshear took over, it was just like the money dried up," says Theresa Armstrong, who sells advertisements at the Grayson County News Gazette. Former Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson's move to Frankfort as lieutenant governor will further hurt Grayson, says Jim Smith, another ad salesperson. "I don't think Abramson should have taken that position. I don't think it's good for us. He has too many ties with Louisville. He would show a lot more favoritism to that area," Smith says.

But does a lieutenant governor have that much power? I ask the name of the lieutenant governor before Abramson. Conversation stops. We look at one another blankly. It was Daniel Mongiardo, but I couldn't remember either, so faint is a lieutenant governor's imprint.

Talking to Tom Chaney is like getting on Interstate 65 to go to Nashville, hopping off to make a quick side trip to check out a three-legged cow you thought you saw, and getting distracted by something down the first side road - and every one thereafter. And, by the way, you never get to Nashville. Or find the cow.
We're in Horse Cave, in the bookstore Chaney operates - possibly the only bookstore with a floor stained with kangaroo pee, he says - and he is explaining how Louisville figures into state political power. "The alliances within the Democratic party, you've got Western Kentucky, and you've got Eastern Kentucky, and Louisville provides the ballast," he begins. Chaney's full beard makes his round face appear even rounder. He dresses like a farmer come to town for the day, in clean denim overalls. A trained actor, there is nothing country about his diction. His sentences are curlicued with asides, side trips, quotes and funny stories that, though you suspect he's told them before, you do not mind.

"From my first awareness of Kentucky politics in the '40s and '50s, the weight of Louisville was always significant," Chaney begins. He starts to tell about Wilson Wyatt, Louisville's mayor from 1941 to '45, suddenly lights upon A.B. "Happy" Chandler, the governor from 1935 to '39 and 1955 to '59, and ricochets off in a new direction.

I learn that Chaney was a founder of the ambitious Horse Cave Repertory Theater in 1977, that he opened the bookstore with his sister and brother-in-law when, he likes to say, his sister called him and said, "It's time to open a bookstore - a new family has moved into town, and one of them can read." I learn that Chaney has twice been the subject of New Yorker stories by Calvin Trillin, and that the second story, published in 1984, tells the tale of Chaney's attempt at agricultural profitability on his aunt's farm. The marijuana crop he planted led to his arrest and three-month stay in "the federal resort," as Chaney calls it. And I learn he once procured a country ham for Julia Child, who declared it "very hammy." I also learn his mother's recipe for ham, which he handed over to Calvin Trillin's late wife Alice, among others.

And here it is. Do not soak the ham, no matter what you've
heard:

One 13- to 17-pound ham, hock and skin removed, with as much fat beneath the skin as possible.

4 cups flour

1 cup dark brown sugar

2 tablespoons ground cinnamon

2 tablespoons ground cloves

2 tablespoons ground mustard

1 tablespoon black pepper

Water to make soft dough, about 2 cups.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Sift together dry ingredients. Add water until you have a soft, spreadable dough. Place the ham on a roaster rack, skin side up. Spread the dough over the skin side of the ham. Bake about three hours uncovered. Remove and discard the crust. When the ham is cool enough to handle, debone.

Given this backdrop, I have high hopes for some piquant comment on Louisville. What does Chaney think of the city?

"I've always loved Louisville," he says.

Across the street, Ben Probus bows a few rich classical notes on a violin. Then, with an elegant cat-scratch of a tone, he switches to a country run, sending notes dancing across the high ceilings of the little building he and his father renovated. It has been a cafe, a gas station, a doctor's office and an insurance office. Now it is the Virtuoso Violin Shop. The first time Probus saw the violin he plays, it was in
pieces. Still, he knew it was good. So he put it back together. Then he played it. "I've owned about 2,000 instruments through the years, and I thought, that's the best of all of them."

When Probus talks, he addresses the floor about four feet ahead and a bit to his left. Yet he's been a performer since age 15, when he took a job at Guntown Mountain, the tourist attraction down the road in Cave City. (It is still in business, although, sadly, Golgotha Bible Mini Golf, where Jesus statues preside over several holes, is not.) "I was an actor, a gunfighter and a fiddle player," Probus says. Since then, he's played with Mark Chesnutt and Jarrod Niemann, and last year performed regularly with the group Gloriana before taking off to start a new band.

So why does he think the rest of the state is sour on Louisville? "Louisville is all industry, and everywhere else in Kentucky is more farm-oriented, so that may make for some conflict," he says. "But the biggest thing is probably just basketball."

Brian Burgess, a luthier with Probus, suggests it's a matter of style. "It seems like a lot of the younger guys (in Louisville) take more of the black tradition maybe. But that's the only clue I have. You don't have many boys driving old trucks and chewing tobacco. They wear big pants and listen to rap music."

We head away from Horse Cave, with a stop in Cave City - where Jessica London, manning the desk at Wigwam Village 2, admits to being a Cardinals fan, even though "I wouldn't want to live (in Louisville). It's too busy for me."

We spend some time in Glasgow, which has two semi-underground barbershops tucked into opposite corners of the town square. Donald Kidd of nearby Metcalfe County is getting a haircut in Lloyd Isenberg's shop. From Kidd's
perspective, the Louisville problem is insidious. "They're trying to make Louisville sports like a part of Kentucky, and they don't take to Kentucky. Kentucky likes Kentucky. Louisville, I don't know, they're different, aren't they, Lloyd?" he asks the barber.

Isenberg deflates any rancor. "Well, they're from the University of Louisville and we're from the University of Kentucky," he says mildly.

Kidd continues: "Louisville got the idea that they're better than Kentucky, and that's baloney, tradition-wise or any-otherwise. They think they know better."

Then he backpedals. "Don't get me wrong. My grandmother and mother was raised there."

Most of the harshest critics are closer to home. On a day of incredible clouds, we are again at the Shepherdsville Flea Market, asking why people don't like Louisville.


And then there's the sense in the state's farther reaches that we in Louisville look down our noses at everyone else. "I feel like, personally, they think we're hillbillies," says Darrell Holmes, who sits on his front porch in Fountain Run, 20-some miles from Glasgow. "To me, they're like people from another state."

But mostly, we find, people don't dislike Louisville. More often, they're positive and sometimes indifferent.

"I think it's a pretty good place to live," says Brenda Adams,
who runs the consignment store Our Little Secret in Mayfield, a town between Paducah and the Tennessee border. "My son lives there. He says it's a great place. There's something to do constantly and the sites are beautiful," she says.

"People say it's a great place," says Angela Neukomm, who owns George J's Restaurant in Glasgow with her husband Daniel. "All I've heard is good things. The only thing people say is, there's no Six Flags anymore. That's the only thing. But they go to the zoo, and when it comes to food, it's Louisville."

We talk to the real Mr. Whipple at his grocery store, Whipple's Food Market in La Center in Ballard County, about 12 miles from where the Ohio River empties into the Mississippi. "What do I think of Louisville? Suits me! It's a nice place," he says. What about the city's political clout, or the amount of government funding it gets? "I think we do all right down here," Whipple says. "We're not an industrial county. We don't have the big population, so why should we get the stuff that maybe we don't need? Yes, we want whatever everybody else gets, but you gotta get what's fair for you."

A side note: Joe Whipple once got a call from Dick Wilson, the actor who played Mr. Whipple for Charmin bathroom tissue.

"He made more money being Mr. Whipple than I did," Whipple says.

But he does have one geographical complaint: The rest of the state just does not know western Kentucky.

"We're really western Kentucky. Beshear, when he ran the first time for governor, he said he wanted to go to western Kentucky to announce his candidacy, and he went to
Owensboro!"

Which may be the moral of our story: For every region there is a chip balanced on some shoulders. Most people are pretty open-minded. Not too many people hate Louisville. But Owensboro! Man, they're trouble!

Kidding. Kidding.

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