



BLACKBERRY FARM: *The beginning*

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“Four miles from Walland on a country road.” • By John Edmondson



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Who might have predicted that one day movie stars, mavens and millionaires would find their way to this gem in the mountains of East Tennessee. “Four miles from Walland on a country road” was part of the description written in the deed of March 21, 1940, when David R. Lasier, my grandmother’s brother, bought 158 acres that would soon be the setting for Blackberry Farm. Uncle Dave, as he was called in my family, purchased the wooded land bordered in part by Hess Creek for \$3,500 from Hugh E. DeLozier, his wife Harriet B. and Paul I. DeLozier. Hugh DeLozier had bought the property from George D. Roberts and Sarah J. Webb; he also purchased some land from Mountain Homes Inc., which was a for-profit corporation in 1936 and a development for getaway cabins. According to Blount County deed records, there was an exception



Marion Elseth at the new Blackberry Farm in 1941.



Dave Lasier and his sister, Ruth Lasier Harris.



The first proprietors, Jim (Jase) and Ruth Harris in 1941.

of one acre involving the estate of the late B.E. DeLozier. It would not be a problem at closing, the parties decided. The deal was done.

(Dave Lasier was no stranger to the second home concept or outside investments. A year earlier in 1939, he had built a comfortable summer house on Lake Tomahawk near Minocqua, Wisc. and spent most summers there until 1963, when he and his wife bought a charming winter house in Naples, Fla. on the Gulf of Mexico.)

Attorney Wayne Oliver, who later became a well-known judge in East Tennessee, handled the Walland Road land sale for the Lasiers and the DeLoziers. (Judge Oliver had a son, Mike, a high school friend of mine with a beagle named Jack. I always thought that was funny, since my dad's name was Jack. Well, maybe it wasn't all that funny.)

The Blount County Register of Deeds in 1940 was R.C. Parkins; Tressie Everett was his deputy. Of course, they both signed off on the transaction, but privately wondered why this wealthy, prominent Chicagoan of Jewish heritage would want 158 acres of massive oaks and sticker bushes in his portfolio. After all, the Ku Klux Klan was known to hold cross-burnings not so far off, railing against the Coloreds, the Catholics and the Jews. And in 1940, it was also commonplace for some warranty deeds to include the condition: "... part of the consideration of transfer is that the described premises cannot be sold, leased, rented or occupied in any manner by any person or persons of African descent for a period of 99 years from this date."

It wasn't long before adjacent landowners — the Flynns, the Webbs, the Buchanans and the Chilhowee Mining & Manufacturing

Company — learned that Dave Lasier planned to build a guest inn for his sister and her husband.

Ruth Lasier Harris and her husband Jim, an on-again, off-again newspaper editor, would run the place. The couple could settle in the mountains, be the very first proprietors and have a stable income -- something they hadn't had in their lifetime, Dave Lasier thought. My sister is 46, he reasoned, and Jim is 51. This is a good time, a proper stopping point in their lives. And we will call it Blackberry Farm, he and his wife, Florida, decided.

Back in Lake County, Ill., and in Chicago, David R. Lasier was a big deal. In 1917, he had joined L.C. Norton as a timekeeper at this company that manufactured superior door closers. Eight years later, Lasier became partners with Norton in the rapidly expanding business. He took over the firm

in 1929, and led LCN on an unprecedented march to worldwide financial success and prominence in the community. Aside from his varied philanthropical accomplishments, he and his father had served on the Chicago Board of Trade.

Sometime in the early 1930s, Lasier met a young Congregational minister who had established a camp for boys in nearby Winnetka, Ill. where he grew up. Lasier's company, LCN, contributed to funding efforts to build the youth camp. That same minister helped Baden Powell form the Boy Scouts of America in 1910; the minister's wife established what are known today in our country as church and neighborhood circles, also in Winnetka. J.W.F. Davies, or Chief as he was called by his campers, was not only a leader in the Congregational Church, but also a true outdoorsman, having hiked and



Ruth Lasier Harris.



Ruthie Harris and Jack Edmondson, the first couple married at Blackberry Farm.

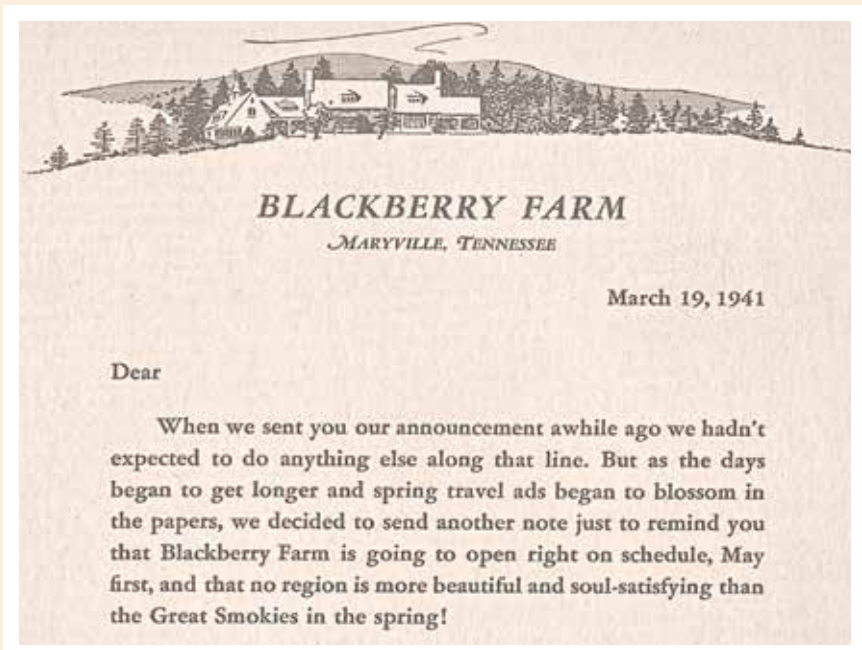


even blazed a few trails in what would become Yosemite National Park.

The paths of Lasier and Davies were forever crossed, and their relationship became even stronger sometime afterwards when they traveled to Maryville and the foothills to search for land. We're not certain if they actually came together, but we know Lasier found his dream investment "four miles from Walland on a country road" in March 1940. Rev. Davies and wife Cora opted for a small house in the Willard Addition in Maryville 13 months later. Seeing the special place that Lasier was carving out of the hills in Miller's Cove, Davies followed his friend's lead and purchased 60 acres just down the road in March 1945. He called his own dream Singing Brook Farm, and through a future twist of fate and curious coincidence, Singing Brook Farm was a place I spent many



Ruth Harris, left, with Marion and Verne Elseth, the inn's first employees.





Dave Lasier on the work site in 1941.



Jim Harris and Ruth Lasier Harris with their dog, Woofie.



Verne Elseth at the gatehouse.



wonderful summers as a boy. That is another story.

After opening Blackberry Farm in the spring of 1941, Jim (his wife and friends called him Jase) and Ruth Harris welcomed many guests over the next three-plus years. Verne and Marion Elseth lived in the gatehouse and were mainstays in the property operation. The first brochure listing the amenities and attraction of Blackberry offered: “Does the change you need mean motoring over mountains, climbing them on woodland trails, playing badminton in sight of them, or just sitting, dozing, and looking at them from a terrace like this? Our guests do all these things, and leave saying they’ll be back soon.”

Another brochure provided a warm greeting: “The Gates of Blackberry Farm Extend a Welcome to...” A line was drawn for the name of the prospective client. Then descriptions of



Above and opposite: Photographs from 1941 and the opening weeks at Blackberry Farm, where guests “enjoy a jolly, restful time...”



the various amenities followed, promoting the farm's location, for example: "High on a spur of Chilhowee Mountain in the Great Smokies lies this picturesque 160-acre tract with its guest house newly built for complete comfort." Another read: "The guest house, of stone, shingles and slate, rambles over the hill almost as though it grew there... built in 1940-41 to realize an ideal of two people who loved the Smokies and determined to create a retreat where others of their mind could find rest, fun and contentment."

Arrangements were by reservation only. "Restricted clientele." Rates American plan were \$7-8 double or \$10 single. (In today's money that's \$129.71 a night double, \$162.14 single. These days, rates start at around \$745 a night with a two-night minimum, plus a 19-percent service charge.





Major Donald and Mrs. Morrison, she, a Lasier sister.



Archery at Blackberry Farm in 1941.



Ready to serve at Blackberry Farm in 1941.



Family dinner on a Sunday in 1943.



Vern and Marion at the gate.



Gladys and Hugh Howard at the chicken house.



L. to R.: Mary Ellen Ames, Jack and Ruthie Edmondson.

With 23 parcels, Blackberry Farm pays close to \$100,000 annually in real property taxes.)

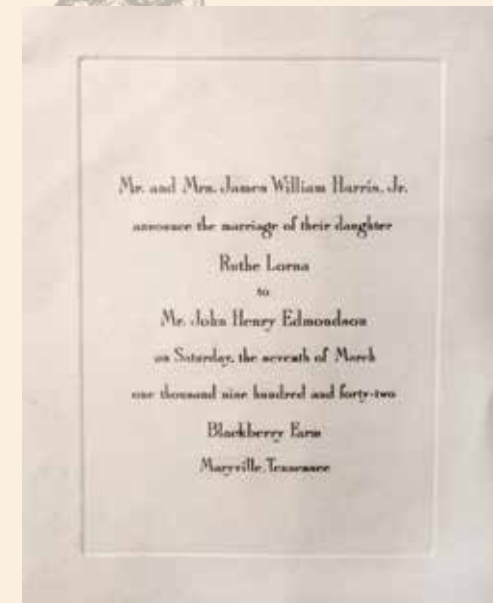
In 1941, Blackberry Farm raised its own chickens, pigs and a variety of row crops. Gladys and Hugh Howard of Walland were among the key workers along with the Elseths. Jase and Ruth Harris began to learn quickly about making a life in the hills among the birds, the bees, the blackberries and other creatures. They no doubt heard about the small son of Harrison Ogle who was playing in the yard just down the road on the Sunday afternoon of Aug. 31, 1941: the little guy stepped on a rattlesnake. It bit him twice before Mr. Ogle killed it, then rushed his boy down to Fort Craig Hospital in Maryville. Neighbors learned later the snake had nine rattlers and one button.

There were successes for Jase and Ruth, but there were also struggles for the couple from

the midwest. In 1944, before World War II had ended, they began to miss the city. (The mountain life was not the only challenge. In late 1942 or early 1943, there were whispers among some people in Maryville that the “outsiders” up at Blackberry Farm might be more than innkeepers. Their appearance, city mannerisms and their less-than-country ways stirred wartime suspicions around town. They had grown up in the Chicago area, and they had once lived in Southern California, where Japanese spies were believed hiding. Could the Harrises be German spies? At one point there was a rumor that a Nazi long gun may have been installed underneath the shuffleboard courts. The talk became so strong that eventually a group representing prominent Blount Countians paid a visit to the Farm. Jim and Ruth gave them a tour, an “inspection” of the area, including the



Ruth Harris (on arm of sofa) hosted luncheons for prominent women from Maryville and the surrounding areas.



At left: Ruthie Harris Edmondson's wedding photo. Above: Wedding invitation.

shuffleboard courts. A short notice in the Maryville Times confirmed the occasion and laid many fears to rest.)

“And Mother had a falling out with Dave,” recalled Jimmie Harris, my mother’s brother and son of Jim and Ruth Harris, then 94 and living in Texas. The relationship became strained. “They thought Dave was treating them as servants.”

The inaugural season in 1941 ran May 1 to December 1. Jim (Jase) and Ruth offered a look at what sort of beauty visitors could expect: mountain laurel in May, rhododendron in June, flame azaleas in July, fall colors in October and November. “But every month has its delights in this region,” they promised.

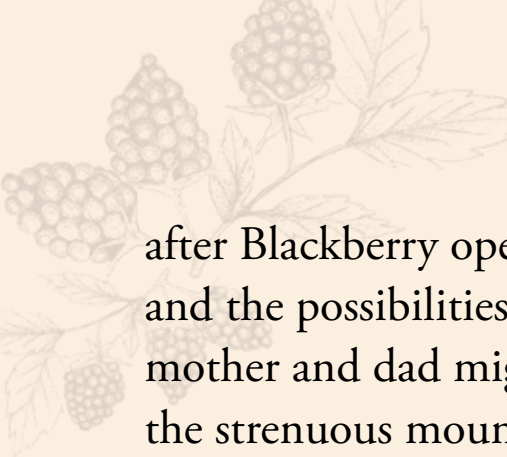
In a promotional note to new customers, Jase and Ruth gave a progress report and painted a picture of comfort and luxury

for the times. “Finishing touches are now being given the building. Well in advance of opening day this brand-new, modern guest house will be complete, spic-and-span. All the furnishings, selected with such care for their appropriateness and your comfort, will be in place.”

“We’ll be in smooth working order, ready to help you see the Smokies and have a jolly, restful time at Blackberry Farm, however long or short your stay.” They also said that transportation to Blackberry Farm was no problem. “It’s easy to get here by car, train or plane,” they assured.

“We’ll meet you in Maryville or at the Knoxville station or airport. Just name the day and hour ”

Our Uncle Jimmie, a celebrated World War II fighter pilot with four kills, attended my mother’s wedding in March of 1942, a year



after Blackberry opened. He saw the beauty and the possibilities, but he suspected his mother and dad might not be cut out for the strenuous mountain life. And his dad, whose 1941 income tax return listed his occupation as guest inn/farm manager, was no handyman. “He couldn’t screw in a light bulb,” Jimmie said with a chuckle. Perhaps the East Tennessee winters were too cold, too tough and prone to periods of isolation.

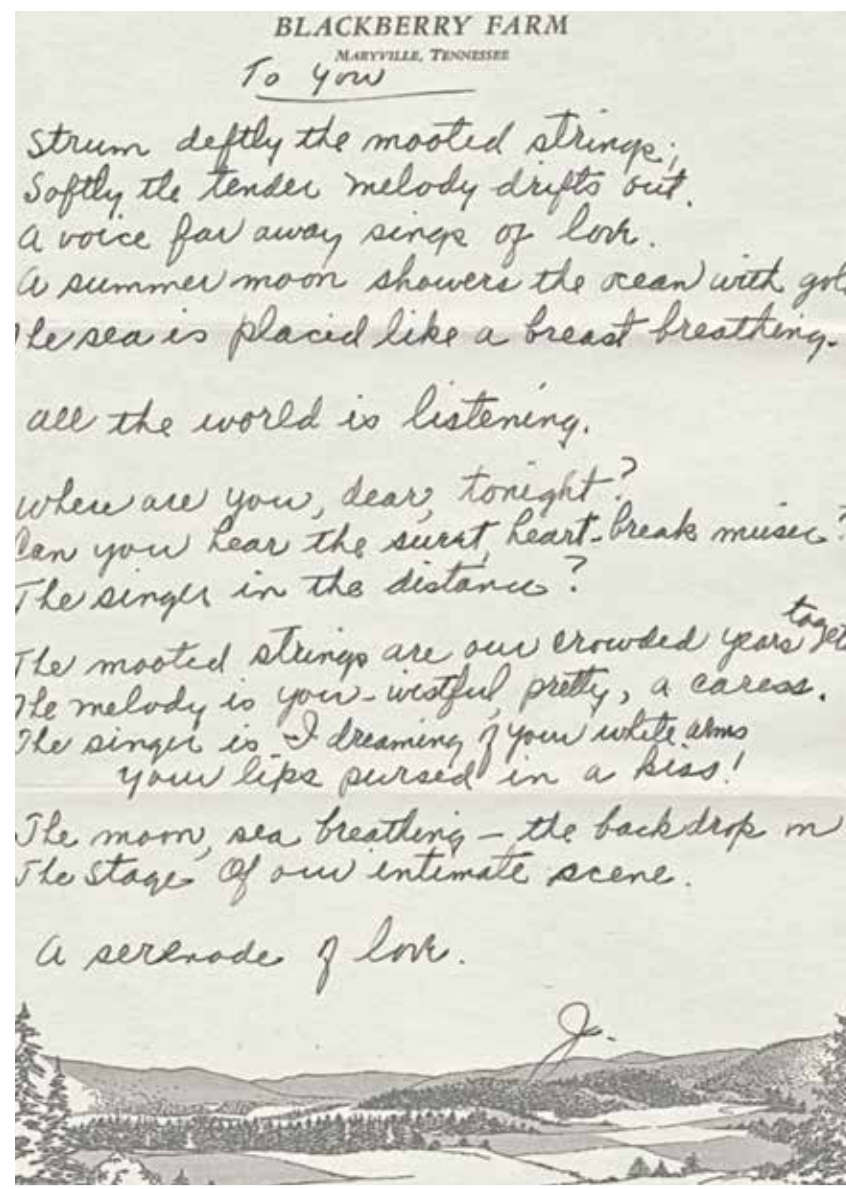
Maybe the couple pined for the warm weather and Southern California where they once lived, or maybe Jim longed to return to the life of a newspaper editor. We do know that in the summer of 1943, as World War II raged on, he tried unsuccessfully to get



Jimmie Harris



Above is Jim (Jase) Harris on his daughter’s wedding day at Blackberry Farm on March 7, 1942. At right: a love poem from Jase to his wife, Ruth.



back into the Navy, or the Coast Guard or Merchant Marines. In a July 9, 1943 letter to the Merchant Marines, he listed his “present position” as “manager of a \$75,000 guest farm 15 miles out of Maryville, Tenn.”

So after settling up with Uncle Dave Lasier before the winter months, the couple left Blackberry Farm and eventually moved back to California and a daily newspaper in Santa Paula. For several months Lasier coped with managing the property from afar. My mother, Ruthie, was living on Oak Park Avenue in Maryville and expecting her third child when she ran into Florida Lasier in downtown in 1947.

The encounter was a bit stilted, my mother wrote in a letter to her mom and dad at their home in Southern California. “Saw Mrs. Lasier yesterday morning,” my mother wrote.

“The woman who was up there (Blackberry



Opposite: A poem of love by Jase; above, Jim Harris during a Walland winter; at right is an article on the sale of Blackberry Farm.

Blackberry Farms Purchased By Jarvis

Blackberry Farms has been purchased by Howard Jarvis, Knoxville attorney, from David Lasier of Princeton, Ill.

Jarvis said this morning that he would continue to operate it as a resort, with possible future expansion. Guests may not be taken during January and February, the new owner said, but it will again be opened March 1.

The 160-acre tract was purchased in 1940 by Lasier and the main building with nine guests rooms erected. Other buildings include a seven-car garage, a large farm house and barn.

Situated in picturesque Miller's Cove, Blackberry Farms has been popular since it was first opened. Jarvis said that he did not yet know who he would employ to operate the resort, but that the same atmosphere and services would be maintained. He declined to state the purchase price, which included the complete furnishings of the main building.

The former owner, David Lasier, is a brother of Mrs. J. W. F. Davies of Miller's Cove.



my arms outstretched
are waiting dear
To draw you
To my heart,
And call you mine,
my girl divine
From whom
I'll never part.

O! come to me
On the wings of love
And give me
all of you!
my dearest whom
I love so much -
my Ruth, so sweet, so true

Farm) had to leave, as her son has TB of the spine... and is not expected to live." Florida told Mother that Uncle Dave was soon coming down from Illinois for three weeks.

"Dave is bringing a new manager and cook," Mother wrote, "and the joint is booked solid all during April." Mother, who had lived at Blackberry until her marriage in the spring of 1942, was well aware of the hard feelings that still hung in the air. "All this conversation," she said of her chance meeting, "took place in Elder's grocery store... we were most friendly." Florida Lasier, indeed, was cordial and respectful and wanted to know how the former innkeepers were faring. "She asked about you, Daddy, the first thing. But still I have no feeling of kinship here at all," Mother added in her letter.

It was years before Mother saw the Lasiers again. Jim and Ruth Harris, the very first

proprietors of Blackberry Farm, would never see them again as a couple. Grandfather Jim died of lung cancer on June 26, 1947, in California at age 56, and Ruth (our Nana) moved back to Maryville with my parents in the house on Oak Park Avenue. She did not stay long. About that time, Cora Davies, who was enjoying the retired life with her husband J.W.F. (Chief) Davies at Singing Brook Farm, died suddenly. On Valentines' Day 1949, after less than a year's whirlwind romance, Nana married the man known as Chief and longtime friend of her brother Dave, and returned to Miller's Cove. David R. Lasier held on to Blackberry Farm as long as he could, then on Dec. 11, 1952, sold the 158 acres, guest inn and outbuildings, equipment and furnishings to Howard and Eleanor Jarvis of Knoxville. Lasier financed the \$37,000

deal: 20 notes of \$1,850 at five percent interest for 10 years, payable semi-annually, according to the Blount County Register of Deeds in Maryville. (In yet another turn of coincidence involving my family — when Nana and Chief decided to move in town to Maryville, Howard and Eleanor Jarvis bought Singing Brook Farm from them on Oct. 6, 1955.)

Blackberry Farm has come a long way. Sandy and Kreis Beall purchased the property from Howard and Eleanor Jarvis in 1976, according to the company's website. Since that time, under the direction of Sam Beall, who died in a skiing accident in February 2016, it blossomed into a truly luxury hotel and resort with a host of attractions and amenities on 4,200 acres, "four miles from Walland on a country road."

The number one song on May 1, 1941, when Blackberry Farm was officially opened, was Jimmy Dorsey's "Amapola." The song was recorded by various artists over the years in both Spanish and English.

Amapola

My pretty little poppy

You're like that lovely flower, so sweet and heavenly.

Since I found you

My heart is wrapped around you

And loving you it seems to beat a rhapsody. Amapola

The pretty little poppy

Must copy its endearing charm from you.

Amapola, Amapola

How I long to hear you say, "I love you."

Editor's note: John Edmondson was a reporter and editor on newspapers around the South. He now lives in his hometown of Maryville, Tenn. He visited Blackberry Farm in 1999 when he went there with his mother -- the only daughter of Ruth and Jim Harris. She was dying of cancer and wanted to show him where she had lived and to recall the good times. The Lasier name is found throughout the family tree. John's sister, who died in 2015, was named Sara Lasier Edmondson Markey. Great-granddaughters are Jennifer Lasier Covert, Ruth Lasier Edmondson and Lindsey Lasier Markey.