

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Taxidermy Tale

Our southern friends have put their own twist on the New Year's ball drop.

By J. Morton Galetto

With the New Year upon us it's time for one of my all-time favorite StoryCorps National Public Radio interviews. It is a love story that involves a snake, a stuffed 'possum, a taxidermist, and the southern version of the Times Square ball drop. I understand that the ball drop at Times Square at New Year's is some type of Swarovski crystal bedazzled sphere. Although I have watched it on television, my reliability in relaying any event taking place at midnight is sketchy at best, not to mention there might be a possible impairment of my already misty memory banks.

It seems that Jackie Jones' first date with her husband of 63 years, Bud, involved his informing her that his pet snake was loose in his car. She was not fond of snakes, but as she told Bud, "You were a hot number for me." Now permit me to say that intellectually I'm all about snakes, but from an emotional standpoint there is no "number" hot enough to have kept me in that vehicle.

Being a taxidermist, Bud evidently kept all sorts of interesting critters on hand, the most famous of which is Spencer, who became a celebrity of sorts. It turns out that like many opossums before him, Spencer had the sad misfortune of being struck by a car. Bud looked at this as an opportunity to mount him and hang him by the tail. "Mount" means he is stuffed by a taxidermist, in this case Bud.

Bud and Jackie live in Tallapoosa, GA, which was formerly known as *Possum's Snout* before incorporation in 1860. At some point someone suggested that Spencer should be dropped, in all his stuffed glory, as a local New Year's Eve celebratory rite. Thus in 2000 forty people came to witness the lowering of Spencer and currently more than 7,000 people attend! I kid you not. And the 2016 estimated population of Tallapoosa, the erstwhile *Possum's Snout*, is only 3187. I can't say if the

drop has driven anyone out of town but it sure seems to draw some folks in.

Know that like all StoryCorps reports this conversation is archived in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Yes, I love that!

So last year I sent my friends a link to the NPR recording of Bud and Jackie's interview. I entitled my email, "My New Year's Gift to You." Because whatever you might think of the story, the interview is simply adorable and hurt-your-sides-laughing funny. But the reply I got from my friend Pam in GA was unexpected: "Clay's Corner, NC, about 10 miles from where I now live, has a live possum drop on NY's Eve. And I did not know Tallapoosa did one too, even though one of my lifelong friend's parents grew up there and retired there."

So I thought our Times Square tradition was odd but these southerners sure have us topped. I thought, "Are 'Possum Drops' actually a thing?"

Bring on the investigation. It turns out that Brasstown, home of the Clay's Corner Drop, is a western North Carolina town which ended its 24-year ritual in 2018 with its last controversial lowering of a marsupial in a plexiglass box. Brasstown is actually known as the

Possum Capital of the South; I feel so sheltered.

Entrepreneur Clay Logan, owner of the Clay's Corner convenience store, used the 'Drop' as a marketing tool. It was complete with country music and people from far and wide coming to dance and witness the rite. A YouTube video shows Clay selling all types of 'possum keepsakes.

Now the possum wasn't dropped, it was lowered, and evidently it was the only Congressionally-sanctioned Possum Drop the country. The Chief of Staff to Congressman Heath Shuler (2007 – 2013) represented Shuler at the 2011 drop and attested to that factoid. I can't say if this contributed to the Congressman's retirement. The decree protected the Drop from lawsuits and provided a 5-day window within which the event could occur. This was intended to keep animal rights activists at bay. When Clay decided to put the tradition to bed, he was simply quoted by columnist Colin Campbell as saying, "It's a hard job to do, and it's time to move on." Colin also offered that Eastover has a Flea Drop and Mount Olive has a Pickle Drop; I reckon I know what I might be writing about next year.

I had occasion to speak with Bud Jones and he assured me that the Tallapoosa drop did not have issues because their 'possum wasn't alive. Bud was charming and he too writes a nature column. Who'd have known. Now, I'm not going to make any moral judgments on the lowering of 'possums, stuffed or otherwise; I will leave that to you. But I will say it was foreign territory for me. Now, I don't know how you are going to spend your New Year's celebration, but I do know one thing for certain: I will never be able to see the dropping of any object at New Year's without thinking about those two southern opossums.



To read factual information about opossums check out J. Morton Galetto's prior story "Oh-Possum" [using this link](#).

You can listen to Jackie and Bud's interview, see photos using this link <https://storycorps.org/stories/the-tallapoosa-possum-drop-a-new-years-eve-tradition/>