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**The RC and Moon
Pie Festival**

Long before the country comedy duo Lonzo and Oscar immortalized the words "Give me an RC Cola and a Moon Pie" in their 1951 song, southerners enjoyed this unique combination of a marshmallow, chocolate, and graham cracker confection and a sugary-sweet soda. It is this timeless and classic southern delicacy that inspired a new "classic"—the RC and Moon Pie Festival in Bell Buckle, Tennessee, celebrating its tenth year in 2004. Before one is prepared to delve into the world of the World's Largest Moon Pie, of "synchronized wading" and "the Moon Pie King and Queen," it is necessary to understand the origins of RC, Moon Pie, and how the pair came to be a southern institution.

Royal Crown Cola "originated in Columbus, Ga., when a young pharmacist named Claud A. Hatcher decided to supply his family's grocery store with drinks he produced and bottled."ⁱ The youth called his "first line of beverages 'Royal Crown,' and the first cola product 'Chero-Cola.' Other products included Royal Crown Ginger Ale, Royal Crown Strawberry, and Royal Crown Root Beer."ⁱⁱ Following rapid sales growth, "in 1912 Hatcher's basement bottling activities grew into the Chero-Cola Co. Sixteen years later, he renamed the company Nehi Corporation, after the

successful line of fruity beverages he had developed."ⁱⁱⁱ Claude Hatcher died in 1933, and then Vice President H.R. Mott "took control of the company and quickly streamlined operations to make the company debt-free within the year."^{iv} Mott planned "the reformulation of the classic Chero-Cola into a more refreshing beverage", and "Chemist Rufas Kamm was given the responsibility of coming up with the new flavor, which took six months to perfect." Kamm's new formula "was released to the public with the name of Hatcher's original line of beverages: Royal Crown."^v

Also during the early 1900s, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a confection was born that remains to this day "The Only One on the Planet!"^{vi} The Moon Pie was a creation of the Chattanooga Bakery, which was founded in the early 1900s as a subsidiary of the Mountain City Flour Mill. The original purpose of the Chattanooga Bakery was to use excess flour produced by the mill.^{vii} The exact history of the Moon Pie was not recorded by Chattanooga Bakery, but Ronald Dickson of Charlotte, North Carolina located a convincing account. He includes it in his volume "The Great American MoonPie [sic] Handbook."^{viii}

After the first edition was published, Dickson received a call from Earl Mitchell, Jr., saying that his father was the one responsible for the Moon Pie's creation. According to the

official Moon Pie Website, "Mr. Mitchell's story goes like this. . . Early in the 1900s, while servicing his territory of Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia, Mitchell was visiting a company store that catered to coal miners." After Mitchell asked them what they "might enjoy as a snack," the miners "said they wanted something for their lunch pails."^{ix} To satisfy the appetites of the men, "It had to be solid and filling." "'About how big?' Mitchell asked", and "about that time the moon was rising, so a miner held out his big hands, framing the moon and said, "About that big!" Then, according to the website, "So, with that in mind, Mitchell headed back to the bakery with an idea. Upon his return his noticed some of the workers dipping graham cookies into marshmallow and leaving them on the window sill to harden."^x

One cookie was not enough, "So they added another cookie and a generous coating of chocolate and sent them back for the workers to try. In fact, they sent MoonPie[sic] samples around with their other salespeople, too." The first Moon Pie was a hit, and "The response they got back was so enormous that the Moon Pie became a regular item for the bakery."^{xi}

By the late 1950s, the Chattanooga Bakery and its new product had grown to the point that it was necessary to stop

production of everything but the MoonPie, and the Pie became a staple of everyday southerners--not just factory workers in Chattanooga.

So how, exactly, did the combination of an RC and a Moon Pie become the classic southern delicacy? According to Billy Phillips, current chair of the annual RC and Moon Pie Festival, it was during the Depression that the two items became known collectively as a "poor man's lunch." At the time, an RC was one-third larger than a Coca-Cola, but cost the same five cents. A Moon Pie was also five cents, and was four times larger than the average candy bar at the time. Workers in Chattanooga factories began to carry the combination in their lunch pails, and according to Phillips, "it literally kept people from starving" during the Depression.^{xii}

Many people ask how the small and lively town of Bell Buckle came to be home to the festival celebrating the combination of RC and Moon Pie. The answer may lie in the family atmosphere of the town itself. Situated along Interstate 24 in Bedford County, Bell Buckle is home to the Webb School and many small, unique shops that cater to the many tourists that Bell Buckle receives.

The town was incorporated in 1856. Tales of the creation

of the name abound, some believing it came from a bell and buckle tied around a tree, others saying that Native Americans carved a bell and buckles into trees to discourage settlers, and still others citing the use of the bell and buckle symbol by surveyors to signify the usefulness of the land for pasture.^{xiii}

Both Billy Phillips and former RC and Moon Pie Festival Chair Anne White Scruggs have said that the town of Bell Buckle is a "cross between Lake Wobegon and *Saturday Night Live*", although Scruggs believes it to be "a lot more *Saturday Night Live*."^{xiv} The *Oak Ridger* called Bell Buckle an "artist's haven," praising its southern charm. Says the *Oak Ridger*, "Just ask the Pie Heads, who rode by on their parade float decked out in huge foam Moon Pies, with signs that read 'Yankees drink Coke.'"^{xv}

The origins of the festival are rather simple. Bell Buckle had no previous ties to the Chattanooga Bakery. It has remained for years a small tourist town rich in southern hospitality, but with no practical industry or function apart from the lovely arts and crafts and good food. The classic combination of RC and Moon Pie gave the Chamber of Commerce of Bell Buckle an idea in 1994. It was the 75th anniversary of the Moon Pie, and they wrote the bakery asking if the town of Bell Buckle could throw Moon Pie a birthday party. 6,000 people showed up to the

celebration—a number that pales in comparison to the over 25,000 that came to the event in 2003.^{xvi}

2004 is the tenth anniversary of the festival, and while the individual components of the festival have grown enormously, the schedule remains basically the same as the first one. Over 100 arts and crafts booths graced the streets during the 2003 event, and homemade food items such as Bar-B-Que and funnel cakes were plentiful. "It's an old-timey country fair with a Broadway twist," says Billy Phillips.^{xvii} The tongue-in-cheek feel of the event makes for a lighthearted atmosphere. Phillips gave the example of the popular music selected every year for the famous Synchronized Wading, which is re-recorded to feature RC and Moon Pie lyrics.^{xviii} Wooden cutouts of RC cans and Moon Pies with holes for faces stand in the middle of the square, ready for a photo op. These simple things delight the young and old alike. "Who ever thought you could have so much fun with a piece of plywood?" Phillips quipped.^{xix} Phillips repeatedly emphasized that the main selling point of the fair is that "from the oldest to the youngest," all can enjoy the festival and relate to the events.

The town of Bell Buckle consistently strives to be family-oriented. For example, the Chamber of Commerce focuses

on beautification. They want a "quality of life worth living." Bell Buckle has no crime, Billy Phillips believes, because they have no police. While this prospect might scare some, Phillips says that others are scared to hire a policeman—they are afraid that might invite crime. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," he said. Bell Buckle is, in Phillips' words, "progressively backward." They have no Wal-Marts, and all the buildings are on the National Register of Historic Places. Family oriented, for all ages, and having a positive image are all things used to describe the town itself. There is a family feel to Bell Buckle, and although it gets visitors every day, in Billy Phillips' words, "Mostly we're just nosy and want to know what's going on."^{xx}

It was the summer of 1996 that put the community and the festival on the map. While the Summer Olympics were taking place in Atlanta, the business people of Bell Buckle wanted to attract the attention of tourists. How could they entice travelers heading to Atlanta on Interstate 24 to make the short detour to the RC and Moon Pie Festival in Bell Buckle? The inclusion of the "RC and Moon Pie Olympics" that year attracted scores of visitors. The Moon Pie Throw (not discus), various games for children, and the now world-famous "Synchronized Wading"

competition were "Olympic" events added that year. It has now grown to dynamic proportions, with preparations and rehearsals for the Broadway-style show taking place months before the festival.^{xxi} When asked what the biggest draw of the festival is, most will mention Synchronized Wading. Anne White Scruggs answered, "Two things—the synchronized wading and the long distance Moon Pie throw. They're probably the best." Scruggs was chair of the event from the first year until about three or four years later ("I can't really remember." she says.)^{xxii}

The first year of Synchronized Wading, while it was "a hoot," was much smaller than in years following. Billy Phillips described the forty five to sixty five-year-old "Buxom Babes" who participated that first year as "absolutely charming." In keeping with the Olympic events, the organizers wanted to have a swimming competition. Since Bell Buckle has no public pool, organizers decided to use a wading pool, and have synchronized wading. When asked about the first wading event, Billy Phillips grew animated. "None of us knew what to expect," he said.^{xxiii}

Participants donned overalls and stepped into the kiddie pool, forming Olympic rings with their arms and splashing happily to music with RC and Moon Pie lyrics. "I was down on my hands and knees, I was laughing so hard," Phillips said. In

the early years, the wading was an actual contest for teams or individuals to enter.^{xxiv} The popularity of the contest has grown to enormous proportions, becoming the sole reason many people visit the RC and Moon Pie Festival for the first time—the author being among them.

"You have to be a little crazy" to participate in this event, Phillips **says**. As one of the original "Buxom Babes," Anne White Scruggs' favorite event is, of course, the wading. She was in it for the first six or seven years, she said, and claimed with pride her status as one of the first ladies in overalls during the 1996 Olympic year. "Do you know what happens when overalls get wet?" she asks. "You can't even move your legs! You ought to see wet overalls on old women—CHUNKY old women. It's so ridiculous, but wonderful too."^{xxv} She was quoted in the *Oak Ridger* as saying, "Here are these middle aged, sturdy females in unbecoming bib overalls," and that "[p]eople just don't quite know if we mean to be funny or not."^{xxvi} Rest assured, no wader will be offended by hearty laughter.

Other events are scheduled yearly, although the synchronized wading remains to many the "most beloved event of the day." The organizers want to entice Kubota front-end loaders to sponsor the event, so a balloon toss on a Kubota front-end

loader has been planned for 2004.^{xxvii}

Another of the most popular attractions is the annual serving of the World's Largest Moon Pie. The forty eight inch diameter, eight inch thick Moon Pie ("It's thick!", exclaims Billy Phillips) is sliced and served to the waiting crowd in the early afternoon. Described as a mob-like situation, serving the huge Moon Pie is one of the highlights of the festival every year.^{xxviii} Unbelievably, the Guinness Book of World Records has never been contacted regarding the pie. To do so might be moot, since it is the only one that the Chattanooga Bakery makes--making it by default the world's largest.

When asked if anyone had ever tried to contact Guinness during her time as chair of the event, Anne White Scruggs replied, "No, we didn't do that—we should. It is the only one that Moon Pie makes."^{xxix} Kati Allison, long-time organizer of the festival and Bell Buckle businesswoman, offered her enthusiasm when questioned about the huge Moon Pie. "Yeah, they bring the largest Moon Pie down from the bakery, then that's cut and served to the whole crowd", she said.^{xxx} A curious phenomenon surrounding the pie is the number of "cashers" who come to receive points for seeing the World's Largest Moon Pie. Armed with Global Positioning devices, these adventurers are

participating in a worldwide scavenger hunt, and the largest Moon Pie is becoming an item on everyone's list.^{xxx1}

Before cutting the largest Moon Pie, the festivities start with a parade featuring the Moon Pie King and Queen. In 2003, T-Rac and the Titans cheerleaders were selected as king and queens. The *Oak Ridger* reported in 1998, "This year, Gov. Don Sundquist agreed to be Moon Pie King—and festival organizers weren't quite ready." Anne White Scruggs told the reporter, "The Governor's office said they wanted to ride the parade route," said Scruggs. "The route's only about a block and a half long. I told them, 'You know, our town's only five blocks long! It's probably the world's shortest parade.'^{xxxii}

When asked how Bell Buckle managed to get big name country stars and talent for the festival, especially the king and queen for the parade, Scruggs said that there are two ways. The first is that organizers "know people that know people," so they can get "friends of friends." The second is to find people that are willing to be committed to a small town such as Bell Buckle. Announcing proudly that she was chair the years that Jessie Coulter and Waylon Jennings were King and Queen and the year Brenda Lee was Queen, she said, "And they [Jennings and Coulter] want \$8000 to walk out of their car." Since Bell

Buckle does not have the money to pay such a sum, they rely on the kindness of these friends who make a commitment to the festival. Politicians are the organizers least favorites to book, as they do not as big a draw as the country music stars. It is important that the entertainment remain family-oriented, says Scruggs, because they want "the little kids and the grannies" to enjoy themselves.^{xxxiii}

How does Bell Buckle manage to pull off this event every year? They become a family themselves. According to Scruggs, it takes people "willing to pull out all the stops and work till they're bone tired." A resident of Bell Buckle for twenty seven years, she arrived "When there was only one store". She has seen the town flourish into a real community. "People do care", she says. Because they care, the festival always seems to work out, despite times of high tension. "The end result [is that they] do come together. . .but when "this many people with good ideas come together," Scruggs draws the parallel that they're often "Like the Waltons, when they were at cross purposes with one another."^{xxxiv}

As with any successful production, things always come out right in the end, and Bell Buckle has had much positive worldwide media exposure to that effect. Scruggs related a partial list

of groups that have filed stories on the RC and Moon Pie Festival in the past. "We were on an Australian Morning Program, and a Japanese group came to do a documentary." Russian and German news media have appeared in the past, as have Turner Broadcasting and the NPT show *Tennessee Crossroads*, which has made a tradition of revisiting the festival every year. The BBC advertised the festival ("They called me at five in the morning," Scruggs said), and she was also on National Public Radio talking about the event. From the Associated Press news to USA Today, "We've had lots of good publicity" she says. "Even that. . . what's that hoity-toity magazine? Gourmet, Gourmet something? They gave us good publicity."^{xxxv}

Radio shows even attend, although the festival loses something without the visuals. "It's almost indescribable," Phillips says. Radio WPLN Live has broadcasted during the events. "Them describing people balancing a Moon Pie on their noses was a quirky thing," Phillips says. What organizers really want is a major network program like *Good Morning America* or *60 Minutes* to feature the festival. "But we'll take anything we can get," he said.^{xxxvi}

Worldwide exposure has paid off, as is evident by the yearly growth in attendance. As Billy Phillips related, runners

from all over the world are beginning to converge on Bell Buckle for the First Community Bank's ten-k run.^{xxxvii} The ten-k Charity Run began as an "Olympic" event in 1996, and has blossomed into a separately advertised event in itself. Two hundred and fifty people entered the first year, and for the past few years, the race has been filled to the 750-person capacity. Phillips indicated that the 750 limit is "all [that the organizers] can handle." As much as \$20,000 has been raised in a single race.^{xxxviii}

The money goes to benefit the Chamber of Commerce, for the maintenance of the town's public restrooms and for publication of brochures advertising various celebrations and shops. A particular draw of the race is its intensity. "It's an endurance test," Phillips says, in the one hundred degree heat and through the hills.^{xxxix} Runners have come from as far away as Kenya, and a special addition in years past has been a female amputee who runs the race. "She was featured on *Sixty Minutes*, but I forget her name," said Anne White Scruggs. "Yeah, we get some really good runners." Because the run is now a sanctioned meet, the runners get points, which is a further draw to the event. It is "over hill and dale," and there are "some noteworthy places" between Bell Buckle and the interstate according to Scruggs.^{x1}

Local farmers are there to help the runners, however. They stand all along the route where their farms meet the road and drag out their hoses to spray the ground and create a cooling mist for runners. "If they want to run through, they can, but they don't have to," said Scruggs. Of course, there are the regular stations along the way for runners to pick up bottles of water. For many participating in the event, they have never been in a race where people turn out the entire length of the route.^{xli}

Turn out they will, come rain or shine. As to whether or not the adage holds that the RC and Moon Pie Festival is the hottest day of the year, Anne Scruggs says that it certainly has been in the past. When they first started holding the event, it was on July 17, as opposed to mid-June, for five to eight years.^{xlii} While it might not always be the hottest day now, people occasionally pass out, overcome with the heat. When asked for her prediction of this year's weather, she said that even though it has been feeling cold lately, "Oh who knows—it may be blazing."^{xliii}

That prospect does not seem to discourage Scruggs, however. She says that people have turned out in every kind of weather—including pouring rain.

It seems that nothing will stop those anxious to watch the spectacles, especially synchronized wading. Scruggs remembers a year when just that happened. She relates the tale of the year that synchronized wading took an Elvis theme. According to Scruggs, it was the first year that the organizers were thinking "out of the box." At the center of the innovation was Carla Webb, choreographer of synchronized wading, whom Scruggs describes as "just insane. . . she has a wonderful, creative brain." A ladder was stood with one half in the wading pool, one half out. An Elvis look-alike was perched on the ladder to sing. "It was so hysterical", says Scruggs. Even though the rain was pouring, spectators crowded around the pool to catch a glimpse.^{xliv}

During my first attempt to contact Anne White Scruggs, I reached a lovely lady named Anita Phillips. She has lived in Bell Buckle for forty three years and has participated in the RC and Moon Pie festival in years past. While she said with a knowing voice that she had never attempted synchronized wading, she has participated in various games. When asked what her favorite thing about the festival was, she answered that she "loved seeing the people happy, seeing the children happy." This is a testament to the fact that everyone can actively participate in and enjoy the activities the festival

provides.^{xlv}

The consensus among townspeople and organizers, when asked what makes the RC and Moon Pie Festival the success it is, mirrors Anita Phillips' sentiments. From the tallest to the smallest, oldest to youngest, and everyone in between, the RC and Moon Pie Festival held annually in Bell Buckle is come-as-you-are fun for all. Rest assured, come June 19th the streets of the tiny town will be filled to capacity with "cashers," celebrities, die-hard Moon Pie fans, and those just curious to see if the festival is real. It is real—a fitting tribute to a classic southern snack and guaranteed "hoot and a holler" for all. The combination of an RC and a Moon Pie has delighted consumers young and old for decades, and 2004 will commemorate the first decade of a festival dedicated to the snack. If the current organizers' hopes are fulfilled, the festival will continue as long as people are still enjoying RC's and Moon Pies.

ⁱ RC Cola History, <<http://www.dpsu.com/RC.html>>

ⁱⁱ RC Cola History, <<http://www.dpsu.com/RC.html>>

ⁱⁱⁱ RC Cola History, <<http://www.dpsu.com/RC.html>>

^{iv} RC Cola History, <<http://www.dpsu.com/RC.html>>

^v RC Cola History, <<http://www.dpsu.com/RC.html>>

^{vi} Moon Pie Slogan, on any Moon Pie box

^{vii} Moon Pie History, <http://www.moonpie.com/hist_text.asp>

^{viii} Moon Pie History, <http://www.moonpie.com/hist_text.asp>

^{ix} Moon Pie History, <http://www.moonpie.com/hist_text.asp>

^x Moon Pie History, <http://www.moonpie.com/hist_text.asp>

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- ^{xi} Moon Pie History, <http://www.moonpie.com/hist_text.asp>
- ^{xii} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xiii} Official Bell Buckle Website, <<http://www.bellbuckletn.org/history.shtml>>
- ^{xiv} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004, and The Oak Ridger Online—State News—Monday, June 22, 1998 <http://www.oakridger.com/stories/062298/aps_rc.html>
- ^{xv} The Oak Ridger Online—State News—Monday, June 22, 1998 <http://www.oakridger.com/stories/062298/aps_rc.html>
- ^{xvi} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xvii} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xviii} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xix} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xx} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xxi} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xxii} Anne White Scruggs, personal interview, Apr. 6 2004
- ^{xxiii} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xxiv} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xxv} Anne White Scruggs, personal interview, Apr. 6 2004
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- ^{xxxv} Anne White Scruggs, personal interview, Apr. 6 2004
- ^{xxxvi} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xxxvii} Billy Phillips, personal interview Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xxxviii} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xxxix} Billy Phillips, personal interview, Mar. 16 2004
- ^{xl} Anne White Scruggs, personal interview, Apr. 6 2004
- ^{xli} Anne White Scruggs, personal interview, Apr. 6 2004
- ^{xlii} Anne White Scruggs, personal interview, Apr. 6 2004
- ^{xliiii} Anne White Scruggs, personal interview, Apr. 6 2004
- ^{xliiv} Anne White Scruggs, personal interview, Apr. 6 2004
- ^{xlv} Anita Phillips, personal interview, Feb. 11 2004

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