



Visit Scott County and the McMurray Mural

This story first appeared in the blog “A View from the Clinch,” which is maintained by the Scott County Tourism Department. The story and photo are reprinted with permission.

A few weeks ago, I posted the photo of this barn mural on the Scott County Tourism Facebook Page. The photo generated so much response that I decided to go in search of “the story” behind the mural. This is what I learned.

The barn, which is located on McMurray Hollow Road in the Hiltons Community of Scott County, is owned by Bill McMurray of Kingsport. The barn and 300 plus acres came to his great-grandfather, William, in a land grant in the 1700s. Since that time, the McMurray family has maintained ownership of the land, with the original family homestead still standing on the property.

Bill wanted to honor his family and their way of life through this piece of living history. The folks on the mural represent four generations of the McMurray family. In the center is his brother, Carl. Standing next to the tractor is his Grandfather, J.R.; father, Homer, sits atop the Ford Tractor. The young man, standing next to the tractor, is Bill’s son, Jeff.

The women pictured are respectively Bill’s step-grandmother, Tiny Doran and, his mother, Hazel, who is still living and will be 103-years-old in April. The Bible verse 2 Thessalonians 3:10: “This we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither would he eat” speaks volumes about the McMurray family.

“They were great believers in worship. They also believed in working. You earn

your own bread by the sweat of the brow.”

When Bill decided to have the life-size mural painted, he contacted well-known Kingsport artist Gary Bortz. “I knew Gary from my days as a postal carrier,” Bill says. “I ran the Bloomingdale route, and Gary went to high school at Ketrone. Even back then, folks said Gary was the best artist in town.”

It was not only important to Bill that Bortz capture the image of his family, but also their spirit. He spent several weeks going through old family albums and digging through boxes looking at family photos. By the time he was finished, Bortz had several photos from which to draw.

“I spent several days looking at old photographs, and then several more days scanning photos,” Bortz says. Bill also wanted his son Jeff, wearing his signature pair of Coca-Cola pants made by his aunt in Indiana and carrying a Fox Horn. “My daddy was a fox hunter, and Jeff was fascinated with the fox horn. He always carried it around when he was on the farm,” Bill said.

Bill and Bortz met about four times to discuss the barn mural. Once the pair agreed on the images, Bortz set to work painting the mural.

It was June of 2007, and it took Bortz about six weeks to paint the 76’ x 32’ barn. Since the barn did not have running water or power, Bill had to provide water and electricity to the location. “I rented a big power unit and a sky track to help Gary work the gigantic canvas.”

And it was one of those hot Scott County summers right from the start. Bortz would paint some in the morning, stop during the heat of the day, and come back in the cool of the evening. Often he would paint all night.

Shortly after the mural was finished,

a photograph of the barn appeared in the Kingsport Times-News. It didn’t take long for word to spread about the family tribute on the hill on McMurray Hollow Road. Bill would drive up to the barn and find cars with license plates from states like Florida or New York parked near the barn. He doesn’t mind the on-lookers.

“I had Gary paint the barn for others to enjoy. That was the purpose.”

According to Bill, photos of the mural have appeared around the world. The barn was once used as a backdrop for a model competition. “People could not believe it was a painting, and they all wanted copies of the barn mural.”

Bortz, owner of Bortz GraphixPlus, has painted numerous signs and other murals throughout the Tri-Cities and Southwest Virginia. He’s currently working on a huge project at the Jericho Shrine Temple. The barn mural, however, holds a special place in his heart, and he often takes his art students to visit the painting.

If you are out and driving around in Scott County, stop by and visit the mural. Bill won’t mind. It’s relatively easy to find. Take the old Bristol Highway; after you go around the bridge detour, the road goes up a hill. McMurray Hollow Road is on the left about one mile after going up the hill. You will take a sharp right turn onto McMurray Hollow. Follow the road about five miles, you’ll come around a corner and see the barn mural on the left-hand side of the road, overlooking the old family tobacco plot.

While you’re there, take a moment to reflect on the mural’s message—the obvious one of which is the importance of worship and work. When you know the whole story though, you will see that the message of preserving and honoring the past is also present in Bill McMurray’s tribute to his family and his heritage.