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DOWN BY THE RIVER USED TO BE WILD, CRAZY

Don Edwards Herald-Leader Columnist

This was always the time of year when young people would head for the river. There would be yelling carloads of them and some on motorcycles and a few, straggling hitchhikers.

They would go to spend the day and come back around dark with wet swimsuits tied around the car's radio antenna so they would dry on the way home.

The hitchhikers sometimes got stranded at the river and would do crazy things to get a ride back to town.

Once a bunch of them started a brush fire in the middle of the highway. When traffic stopped, they tried to fast-talk the drivers into giving them a lift in return for clearing the road.

Sometimes there were fights at the beach and the police were called. It was a pretty wide open place back then with no lifeguards and signs that read: SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK.

Alcohol was illegal there, but a lot of beer and vodka got smuggled in among the Coppertone bottles and the beach towels. A favorite trick of college students was to "gin a melon" by pouring a whole bottle of gin into a chilled watermelon and then eating it a slice at a time.

The Kentucky River that the young people were interested in was the stretch between Boonesboro Beach and **Johnny Allman's** Restaurant.

The beach was still privately owned in those days. In later years, it would be cleaned up and turned into a state park.

The place had been a resort at one time. You could still see the remains of a 1920s dance pavilion and the sagging old wooden hulk of a hotel.

Downriver from the beach, next to a rock quarry, was an iron bridge that spanned the river between Madison and Clark counties.

The Madison side was legally "dry" of alcohol, at least in theory. The Clark side was legally "wet."

At the Clark end of the bridge stood a little log tavern called the Daniel Boone Inn. with a sign that read: "Coldest Beer on the Kentucky River."

In its heyday, The DBI, as its regular patrons called it, did \$3,000 of business a week when beer was 25 cents a bottle.

Behind the DBI were two outhouses, one marked "Gentlemen" and one marked "Ladies."

Beyond the outhouses, standing on a tiny hill and looking solemnly upriver, was the worst-looking statue of Daniel Boone ever displayed by a public roadway in Kentucky.

"River rats," as local residents were called, used to get drunk and shoot the nose and fingers off the stone statue.

The bartender at the DBI would tell visitors the legend of the homely Boone statue.

According to the story, Clark County schoolchildren had donated nickels and pennies until enough money was raised for a local cemetery stone carver to create it.

When it was unveiled, the crowd groaned. The sculptor, a short, fat man with a round face, had carved the statue to look exactly like himself.

Nobody in town wanted it. And so it was orphaned on the highway next to the river.

All that is gone now. The iron bridge was replaced. The DBI was torn down. The comical Boone statue was moved to a city park in Winchester.

Young people don't go to the river as they once did. At dusk, the willow trees full of lightning bugs that once lined the river's banks like a thousand tiny porch lights are mostly gone, too.

The place is more sedate, but less colorful. More predictable, too. Now, when you drive around down there on warm nights, you never expect to see a brush fire in the middle of the road.