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Price column: Man much more than music-trivia question



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You might know Tommy Gallon from his brush with pop-culture history. Almost a half-century ago, he arrested Merle Haggard twice within a 30-hour period: Once after a botched burglary attempt, a second time after Haggard escaped from the county jail.

In doing so, Gallon helped set into motion a chain of events that led Haggard from San Quentin Prison to the Country Music Hall of Fame.

But Gallon, who died June 27 in Bakersfield at age 83, was no mere music-trivia question.

He devoted his life to helping kids in Haggard's situation and much worse, working with emotionally disturbed children for 23 years. The Haggard affair was just one little vignette in a long life well lived.

Gallon served as a Kern County sheriff's deputy for almost nine years but, in a way, was never really cut out for the job. He had a tendency to feel a little too sorry for some of the people he arrested. "He even got in trouble for it at work," said Ann Mickelson Gallon, his wife of 42 years. "He asked himself, 'Isn't there a better way?' He wasn't making any progress in what he saw as his life's work."

So he did something about it. In 1962 he set out to get a degree in sociology at Cal State Northridge. He decided he would try to reach troubled kids while there was still time to make positive changes in their lives.

"Why do we keep arresting the same people over and over again in those neighborhoods?" he said in a 2006 interview, referring to some of the poorer sections of Oildale. "Because their values and attitudes are set, and have been since they were 4 or 5 years old. And unless something dramatic happens to bust them out of it, they'll stay there."

He got a temporary job at the Hathaway Home for Children, a residential school on the DeMille Ranch in the Angeles National Forest above Los Angeles, intending merely to pay his way through college and keep food on the table. He and Ann, whom he married in 1964, ended up staying 23 years -- he as a vocational education teacher, she as an administrative assistant.

Many of the children who came to the Hathaway Home had been abused in their parents' homes or in foster care. Some came to the facility as failed adoptions. Some came straight out of juvenile hall. Virtually all were emotionally disturbed, and many had learning disabilities.

Gallon finally got "that piece of paper" he had long sought -- a bachelor's degree in sociology -- in the late 1960s, followed soon afterward by a teaching credential from UCLA. But he stayed at Hathaway, where he specialized in woodworking and welding. The girls in his classes, he fondly noted, were often the best welders.

Typically, students' first project was to cut out their own name in wood, an undertaking with dual benefits: It familiarized them with tools and techniques, and it reminded them they were individuals. The projects got more complicated from there. "I told him I couldn't do that," one unnamed boy told the Hathaway Home newsletter in 1985. "But Tom said I could ... and it turned out he was right."

"That answered a lot of questions I had when I was with the Sheriff's Department," Gallon said of his career change.

Gallon, the son of a vaudeville actress and the assistant Kern County coroner, served in the South Pacific during World War II and in the Korean War six years later. In between, he and his first wife, Marilyn Moon, ran what may have been the first swim school in Bakersfield, operating out of their backyard pool. Gallon, who swam and ran track at Kern County Union High School (class of 1941), also coached the Bakersfield Blue Fins swim team, pushing four of his swimmers (including his son Jack) to national age-group championships.

After his first marriage ended, Gallon met Minnesota native Ann Mickelson, the Foothill High School librarian, who'd been talked into appearing in a production of "Annie Get Your Gun." He played banjo in the orchestra; she had "one costume change and one line."

They married two years later.

His taste in music leaned toward old standards and the blues, but he always followed Haggard's career. He only met the man three times, however -- twice in late 1957.

Gallon was a rookie sheriff's deputy when, on Dec. 19, he and his partner, Bob Mooney, arrested Haggard for burglarizing Fred & Gene's Cafe -- while it was still open for business. The deputies seized booty from a previous Haggard burglary, too.

The next day Haggard, then 20, escaped from the jailhouse by filing out the door with fellow prisoners who were being herded into a bus to go to municipal court. Haggard ducked away while the jailers weren't looking.

The escape infuriated Gallon and Mooney, and they spent much of the next 30 hours chasing him down. They finally caught up with Haggard at his brother Lowell's house, sitting at a table having a cocktail.

"Can I finish my drink?" Haggard asked them.

"I couldn't say no," Gallon remembered later. "It was (almost) Christmas Eve. I said, 'Go ahead, it's the last one you're going see for a long time.'"

The Kern County sheriff awarded Gallon a certificate of merit for his persistence in the case. Buck Owens asked for permission to display it at his Crystal Palace museum and dinner club, and that's where it's been since 1999.

Gallon showed up at a Bakersfield Planning Commission meeting in 2006 as a show of support in the effort to name a Bakersfield street in Haggard's honor. Just the fact that Haggard had escaped his downhill slide was reason enough for Gallon.

"That's a trap, and most people don't get out," Gallon said in 2006. "... To see someone break out of that and do something good just tickles me pink. Good for him."

Gallon met Haggard a couple of weeks after the planning commission meeting -- much to Haggard's surprise -- when the singer spoke at Cal State Bakersfield. They talked privately for a few minutes and seemed to enjoy each other's company. Haggard remembered with appreciation that Gallon had allowed him to finish that Christmas-week cocktail -- his last, just as Gallon had suggested, for almost three years.

Gallon had three children from his first marriage, two of whom survive him: Jack Gallon, who works with learning-disabled students at Taft College; Rebecca Kunin of Westlake Village, who works in the entertainment industry, among other pursuits; and Gary Gallon of Montreal, who died in July 2003 at age 57 of complications from cancer. Gary Gallon, who helped start one of the first municipal recycling programs in the world while serving as a senior policy adviser in Ontario's environment ministry in the 1980s, played a role in the 1971 creation of Greenpeace.

Tommy Gallon was actively caring for the dogs and geese at his west Rosedale home up until the morning last month when he walked in for surgery to repair a blocked femoral artery. He never recovered from the bypass surgery and died two weeks later.

Haggard called Gallon's widow with condolences Tuesday evening.

Family and friends will host a memorial celebration at 1 p.m. Friday at the DoubleTree Hotel in Bakersfield.

"I wish I still had a while longer to live," Gallon said in 2006, "because I see a lot more to do." With the good ones, that's always the case.

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