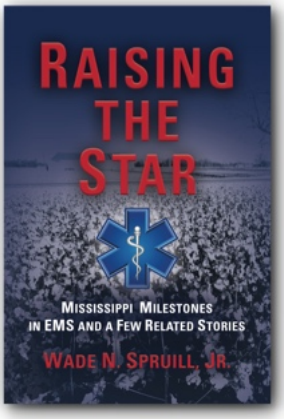


Raising the Star, Mississippi Milestones in EMS and A Few Related Stories is a creative non-fiction/memoir written by Wade N. Spruill, Jr. Using personal and never before told stories, Spruill reviews some of the most significant milestones related to the development of the nationally recognized/respected Mississippi EMS and Trauma Care Systems.

Raising the Star

Mississippi Milestones in EMS and a Few Related Stories

by Wade N. Spruill, Jr.

Raising the Star

Mississippi Milestones in EMS and a Few Related Stories

Wade N. Spruill, Jr.

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64718-466-7
Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64718-467-4

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2020

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Spruill, Jr., Wade N.
Raising the Star Mississippi Milestones in EMS and a Few Related Stories by Wade N. Spruill, Jr.
Library of Congress Control Number: 2020906774

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chance

Confused and a little depressed, I sat in The Grill at the student union on the Ole Miss campus during late spring of 1970. A twenty-two-year-old senior scheduled to graduate in June that year, I feared the future as I had finally realized that my life-long dream of going to medical school was over. Staring at my glass of Coke and a partially-eaten grilled cheese sandwich, I felt panicky as my mind raced about possible alternatives. My weak grades in the pre-med track gave me no chance at my dream, and I knew it. Surely a career waited for me—but what? What could I do with a bachelor of arts degree? I dreaded telling my parents and friends that I had no plan. I also was embarrassed.

The Grill specialized in greasy junk food—aromatic burgers, fries, and toasted bread—which appealed to college kids. Many chose as their hangover remedy the spectacular grilled cheese sandwich tooth-picked with a large dill pickle slice. I wasn't hung over that day, but I suspected many were as the place was packed with students happily anticipating the end of the school year. Always a noisy place, The Grill seemed particularly loud that day as I placed a notebook on the table to jot down ideas about next steps. That's probably why I didn't notice David until he sat down beside me.

David Palmer had been one of my two roommates for the past two years. Larry Boozer, a pharmacy student, made three of us who shared a cramped converted attic above the Morgan home just a few blocks north of The Square in Oxford. Sort of geeks-in-style, we all had become close friends as a result of living, studying, and partying together. "Booz," as David and I called him, finished school and had moved out, leaving us to do final closure on a beautiful time of our lives. David, a pre-med student who made straight A's, had already been assured of his acceptance by the University of Mississippi School of Medicine in Jackson. He just needed to go through the formalities of it all. He was the last person I needed to talk to that day—or so I thought.

"Who is she?" he asked as he picked up my sandwich.

"I'm screwed alright; not by a female, but you know that."

"Well, you got that far away look, so what is it? Hope you were through with your sandwich, dang dried out crap. Done with your Coke?"

"Sure. I'm suicidal here, Palmer; I've got to get my head on straight; I need a plan. C'mon, doc, help your soon-to-be ex-roomie out. Talk to me or shoot me. You think nursing school for me?"

"Good God Almighty, Spruill, you don't look nursey; you look like something, but it ain't a dang nurse. I can't imagine looking up one day and seeing you all in white, prissing in to help me with a patient, assuming I make it, of course. Dang, that's a scary thought!"

"Okay, I'll shelve the nurse idea; so, what? Teaching?"

"Well, you could teach with your double majors. Hell, ain't your minor English? The biology and psychology interest me more, but dang, do you want to starve to death trying to live on teacher money? You in a high school? Can't see it. Thanks for your scraps; I'm gonna miss this place and everything about being here. Sad, but what about the doctor of osteopathic school in Illinois we discussed? The DO graduates ain't real doctors according to what I hear about them, but they're coming, I'm told. Anyway, most people won't know the difference twenty years from now. And that psych stuff, you really like that brain-bending, don't you? Grad school, look at being a dang clinical psychologist. You might like dealing with crazy-ass kids and women."

"You're jerking me around trying to cheer me up. I get it, but I'm really lost here. Teaching, you're right, is not for me. Grad school and the DO thing? I'd need money for that and gotta have a job for that; that's my dilemma here. You're not listening."

"Look, I just left The Square, and there's a job fair going on down there. Carry your depressed butt down there and check it out. I need to go over to Hume Hall now; I'll meet you at our place, and we'll drink on this some more. "Bye, nurse."

I sat there another half hour, wondering about what might have been and feeling sorry for myself. Then I decided that sitting there wasn't helping me and I needed to move. I thought about going back

to our attic apartment for quiet time planning and chose that to be my best temporary escape.

Driving home and mostly because I was curious, I changed from the shortest route to drive around The Square and look at what David had said was a job fair. Parking was commonly a problem there; so, I thought it would be a ride around the courthouse once, then on to Lamar Street north to home. As I approached Neilson's, by chance an empty parking space opened at its front door. I quickly parked my 1962 Ford Falcon and got out. Morgan's Jewelry was on the opposite corner; so, I started that way to spend a little time with our landlord, one of the store owners. That's when I saw a sign dangling from a table with the word Health printed on it, and I walked straight to it.

A long-framed man with a crew cut stood up as I approached.

"Hi, sir, I'm Wade Spruill. Are you part of the job fair I heard about earlier today?"

"Yes, I am. My name is Bobby Redding, so glad to meet you."

"Yes, sir; thanks, glad to meet you, too. Well, I'm a lost senior with a lost career path, and I honestly have no idea what to say to you other than that. Pitiful, I know."

Breaking into a broad smile, he said, "What's your degree, and I'll see if I can help you find yourself again."

"I'm told that my pre-med track has also earned me two degrees; one in biology and one in psychology with an English minor."

"Okay, fine. And we, you, are graduating in June, correct?"

I nodded yes.

"Where are you from? I mean you are interested in work in Mississippi, right? Can't help if you are thinking anywhere else."

"Sorry, Mr. Redding, and I don't mean to sound short, but before we get off into my roots, do you actually work in a health care area, or are you some sort of recruiter?"

With another big smile, he said, "I do! I work for the health department as an engineer in environmental services. And yes, today I am a recruiter, I guess, but that's not my normal role. "We have other employees staffing booths for the health department at most all of the in-state colleges and universities at different times depending on graduation dates and scheduling, of course. You are not being short at

all; I'm glad you asked. What's your interest in the health department—what made you walk over to the booth?"

"Honestly? Depression and desperation! Plus, I saw the word Health, and health has been my interest since early childhood. But mainly I need to have a job after four years of wasting money my parents don't have. I guess I'll eventually go to graduate school and get something of value for potential employers. What, I'm not sure, but with a B.A. degree I'm thinking that the market for me is not very wide."

"Wade is your name, right? Well, Wade, first let me say that you have not wasted your folks' money; I can assure you of that, and your parents are delighted, more than likely. Now, are you planning to stay in Oxford or relocate?"

"I'm going home to Greenwood this weekend to tell them that I'm moving back in until I get a job. I hope they are delighted as you say, but I don't know. I really don't have any other option now."

He quickly wrote something on a small note pad, ripped the page off and handed it to me saying, "Please, while back home, try to contact Mr. Miller this weekend or during next week, if possible, at that number. His full name is there; he's a great guy and will love to talk to you. I will let him know that you will be calling him. Don't be bashful or put this off, promise? Good luck."

"Thank you, Mr. Redding, but do you really think y'all might have work for me?"

"Yep, and more options than you think. If desperation led you to me, it was the right time, and I'll be seeing you later. I am sure of that!"

As we shook hands, he smiled more extensively than before. The note read, with two numbers listed for Miller's home and work, "Call Mr. John T. Miller, Administrator, Leflore County Health Department in Greenwood, Mississippi. Thanks, and nice to see you, Bobby."

Later that evening, as David and I were drinking our futures through, I decided not to return to my parents' home. I was not ready to face them without some semblance of a plan, and I didn't have one, other than a phone call to a stranger given to me by another stranger.

Instead, I bunked Saturday and Sunday at a childhood friend's apartment in Greenwood.

Around eight-thirty Monday morning, I called the work number listed.

"John Miller, Leflore County Health Department."

"Hello Mr. Miller, this is Wade Spruill, Jr. Sir, I am calling you about a job. Mr. Redding in Oxford suggested it and gave me your numbers. Is this a good time for you?"

"Yes, Wade, and I expected your call over the weekend, but now is fine. We need to talk face-to-face. When can you come to see me in Greenwood?"

"I am here now, sir. I could today even—I mean, if you can see me."

"Hell, I'm here all day today; so, come on now."

Startled at his quickness, I nervously agreed to come before noon that day.

In 1970, the Leflore County Health Department was an aging navy-grey two-level building directly across from the Leflore County Courthouse. After I parked, I stood there for several minutes to get my courage in order. What a sad structure for a sad senior, I thought.

As I stared at this gloomy place, an inner voice kept saying, "Remember your goal, Wade! You are getting a temporary job to fund graduate school. This might be your way out; so, go for it!" So, I took an extra deep breath and walked in.

I was greeted by an amiable but elderly lady as I stepped up to the reception desk.

"Hey, hun, I am Sue Bailey. What can we help you with today?"

"Yes, ma'am, thanks. I have a meeting with a Mr. Miller? I talked to him about an hour or so ago, and he told me to see him before noon today. I hope that I am not too early; I can wait or come back."

"Oh no, no, no, hun; he's here. I think he's working on one of his turkey calls. Hasn't had much luck this spring, and he's blaming it on his calls. He is driving us nuts with all that screeching noise, bless his old heart. Come on, and I'll take you to him."

We walked down an old scarred brown-tile hallway on the first floor toward his office. As we approached the end of the hall, I heard

the screech cluck, cluck, cluck noise she had referenced. I understood her agitation with it as it didn't sound like a healthy turkey, if a turkey at all.

"John, this young man is your appointment, Wade Spruill. Y'all have fun. See you later, hun."

John T. Miller sat crouched behind a grey Steelcase desk sanding on a wooden box turkey call. Without looking up at me, he started our meeting with, "Wade Spruill, Jr., son of Wade and Alcia Spruill here in Greenwood, baseball player once with a mean sidearm delivery, not much speed but lots of ball movement, drummer in several local bands, and about to graduate from Ole Miss next month in biology. You that Wade Spruill?"

Stunned about his knowledge about me, I answered, "That would be me, sir, but how do you know…?"

He interrupted me, "Well, I know your parents, not closely, but I know them. Love sports, especially baseball, and I had watched a lot of local baseball even when you played. Never understood why you quit. Heard about your music over the years and figured that was it. Bobby Redding told me about your college, a little about your situation, and that he wanted credit for recruiting you. I told him that his request struck me as humorous coming from a Mississippi State graduate. Ha! A State man is wanting credit for recruiting an Ole Miss man? Too funny. So, don't be too impressed about what I know as I cheat a lot." Then he looked up at me for the first time, put down the box turkey call, and stood up to shake hands.

"Wade, your hand's cold, and you ain't dead; so, no need for nervousness. You know anything about turkey hunting?"

"No, sir, but…" Then he cut me off again.

"Me either, apparently. I thought I did, but it is looking doubtful that I do. You're needing a job; so, let's get to that. We can talk turkey later. Tell me what you think I need to hear, please."

"Yes, sir, and thanks for the opportunity. "

After about fifteen minutes of listening to my story, he interrupted me again.

"Okay, son, I think I have enough to go on, but let me just spit it out. I am the administrator for this health department district, the Delta

District. In fact, I'm the only district administrator the Mississippi State Board of Health has, and I need two sanitarians. With your biology degree, you qualify, and since I know all I need to about you, I am offering one of these Greenwood positions to you. Oh, and I'd like you to start the first of July, assuming those bastards in Jackson don't slow down the damned paperwork. The salary ain't good, but it ain't bad, either, once you understand the system and long-term benefits of working for the state. That's the standard state government sales pitch, you see. You interested enough to get the rest of this proposition in detail? I've thrown a lot at you."

Completely overwhelmed, I answered with a simple, "Yes, sir, let's talk."

Mr. Miller explained that the Mississippi State Board of Health was experimenting with regionalized management of local health centers and had made him the first titled district administrator. The regional health centers in counties were commonly referred to as health departments. Those county departments making up the geographic area of Mississippi commonly referred to as The Delta had been organized into the Delta District. Years later this organizational structure probably would be implemented statewide.

Very proud of being the first administrator of the first district, he wanted to be known as the best at budgeting, filling employee vacancies quickly, and keeping them supplied. He had another interview with a Delta State graduate planned and hoped to report to the central office bosses in Jackson that the two vacancies would be filled by the beginning of the new fiscal year, July first. The official title of the position being offered was Sanitarian I, an entry-level position. Both positions would have offices in this building Monday through Friday of each week, eight a.m. to four-thirty p.m., except for state and federal holidays. The work would consist primarily of enforcing all Mississippi regulations related to food-handling establishments, dairies, water systems, and sewage disposal.

With my biology degree, he proposed the higher annual salary for me, if I accepted, of $6,060 plus state benefits and mileage for the use of my automobile which would be required. The Delta State grad would get a lower salary of $5,700 due to his education degree, but the

benefits would be the same. Leflore and Carroll Counties would be our territories, but the whole Delta District might be included later. Dewey Robinson, a veteran sanitarian, would be our supervisor, but Mr. Robert Lary, Greenwood's police chief's brother, had been hired back from retirement to train us. He made that arrangement because he didn't trust Dewey.

"So, that's all I got in that bucket, Wade. What ya think? Are you ready to sign up with us? I know, it's a little start and likely not what you expected after four years of listening to a bunch of academic folks tell you how the world was yours for the taking. Most of those horses' asses never been out in the real world that I'm aware of, but. . . Anyway, it's your time to ask me questions; so please fire away. Oh, but first let me tell you that I'll be busy kissing butt in July; we got our first district health officer coming, a one Dr. Alfio Rausa. God only knows where they found him. He ain't from the Delta, I can tell you that. Ole Doc Rausa and you boys will start the same day, if he shows. The Delta's a different kind of place, but you know that better than he ever will, God bless him! Now please, ask away."

The urge to vomit was overtaking me; so, I sat there and said nothing.

"You in deep thought there, Little Wade? That's your nickname, ain't it?"

Now, I really wanted to hurl all over his desk. How in the hell did he know that, too?

"Mr. Miller, I really thank you, but I just have a lot on my mind, a lot to consider, you know? I think I need to go now and think about this awhile as I do not want to mislead you or make a mistake here. I can't really think of anything right now, to tell you the truth. Can I call you or see you later this week? I mean, is that okay with you?"

I had to get out of that building, or bad things were about to happen. The reality of this job after four years of college combined with dreams of an exalted lifestyle was taking its nauseous toll on me. Can I fall any further from grace, I wondered?

"Well, I guess, but don't screw around, Wade. Let me know one way or the other. It takes a while getting paperwork done in state

government. Lord, it'll test your patience. Okay, well you know the way out, and I hope you'll call me soon."

He stood up again, and we shook hands. Then I raced out of the building into the fresh Delta air and into my car, where I threw up.

After cleaning up at a local Billups service station, I decided that the attic in Oxford was the best place for me; so, I began what would turn out to be a very emotional journey. As I traveled north from Grenada toward Coffeeville, it started to rain, and I succumbed into a sobbing cry.

It was raining in Oxford, too, and the town seemed deserted as I circled The Square and onto North Lamar Avenue. I hoped that David would be home and I wouldn't be alone in our attic apartment, but he wasn't. Alone, I decided that a cold Budweiser beer might settle me down, but our little fridge was bare, and Oxford and Lafayette County had not yet legalized the sale of alcoholic beverages of any kind. Desperate to be around anyone my age that I could talk to and maybe break my depression, I changed from my stained suit into jeans and tennis shoes, then pulled on a used Ole Miss football jersey before heading to The Grill. Hopefully, there I would find some friends.

It was late May, and exams were nearly over for most, so The Grill was not the usual noisy inhabited place. Students were milling in and out, likely checking to see if grades had been posted or just preparing for the end of the school semester. No one I knew was among them. I sat there eating what would be my last grilled cheese in The Grill when a strange sense of separation from school shook me. For the first time in four quick years, I felt out of place. I dumped what was left of the sandwich and walked out of The Grill and student union building.

The rain had stopped, and the sun was in full view as I walked toward my car. Knowing that college was over for me, I thought about trying to find my guidance counselor for one last worthless conversation, but what the hell was he going to tell me now that I did not already know? I pictured him leaning back in one of those worn-out high-backed chairs in his shared so-called office telling me that I hadn't worked hard enough, hadn't applied myself, had partied too much, missed too much school trying to be another Ringo Star, blah-blah-blah. I'd like to see his damned transcript! Screw that grad

student bastard and the horse he rode in on; he never helped me a bit and was always condescending, I thought. I'm a graduate now, too, and my grades prove it. I'll be walking across that stage with that silly-ass cap and gown next month. I no longer need his opinion, I've got my own; not good, but I've got one.

So instead of entering the Lyceum for his office, I walked around the University Circle and into the Grove to think. Since the summer of 1966, I had spent many days of laughter with friends under those beautiful trees. The Grove's reputation as the place to be for football weekends certainly preceded me, but I had also found it to be a perfect place when I needed to be alone. I had studied there, and other times I just sat and watched students as they passed by. Many days I had played my guitar there, sometimes gathering small crowds and running some away from other sessions. I had been drunk as hell there, and I had been hungover there. I smiled at myself thinking about those soon-to-be precious times of the past. Hell, I'm a drummer, not a guitarist, I thought, as I sat down on one of the concrete benches scattered throughout the area. I was sad, too, knowing those carefree student days were forever in the past. Today was the time for me to grow up, face the obvious, and do something, even if it turned out to be wrong.

The temperature was refreshing after all of the rain, but the sun was changing that quickly with the regular breezes absent. I began to sweat a little as I rapidly walked through the Grove toward University Drive where my car was illegally parked again. No ticket and all those other ones are paid, I thought, as I slid under the steering wheel of my little brown-and-white Falcon. Slamming the door, I yelled out to myself, "Pack up and go home, you twenty-two-year-old screwup! You better get your game together and soon. You're the only one you know who can fix the mess you've made for yourself. No more fantasizing. Your dream is dead; so, let it go, get some direction in your life; and do it now."

In less than two hours and as the sun was going down, I left Oxford the last time as a student and was on my way home to tell my parents everything.

In 1970, my patents still had a black-and-white RCA television, and they were watching it in the living room when I entered through

its front door. It was a small room and had a window air conditioning unit that was very loud, which kept them from hearing me as I arrived. Not expecting me until the weekend, which was normal, they were surprised to see me on a late Monday night, but they were happy to discover that I wasn't sick or anything wrong. Sitting at their small dining table, after plenty of hugs and a plate of leftovers, I told them everything.

Dad spoke first. “Son, John Miller from the health department called me at work earlier today; so, your mother and I already know about your interview. We think that’s great, but why didn’t you tell us you were in town? Miller said he thought you were being down on yourself about school, said he was worried about you. Must have been, too, because I haven’t talked to him since your baseball days. He was always a fan of yours—did he tell you that? Wade, we couldn’t be any prouder of you than we are. Son, you are about to graduate from college! Do you know how great that makes us feel like as your parents? Everybody has a role in life, and maybe being a doctor wasn't your role, but I know there is one waiting for you. You just got to believe in yourself, and it’ll happen. Look, do what you want to about this health department thing, but it’s better to have a job when you are looking for one. I’ve always heard that, and it's true. Every time I changed jobs, I had one, same with your mother. You’ve got a big world out there waiting on you—no telling what’s around the corner, but you’ve got to look. This won’t be the last time you’ll feel uncertain about yourself or the future. So, enough daddy talk—Al what you think?”

Al? Wow! I had forgotten how dad always referred to my mother, Alcia, as Al when he was really being serious. She knew it, too, and I could see how concerned she was as she finally got a chance to speak.

"I did graduate from high school, but your dad didn't. Times were different for boys back then, but for girls, too, with the Depression and all. But we have done okay; no, we aren't living on Grand Boulevard, but we're okay.”

Then, if you lived in northeast Greenwood or on Grand Boulevard, lined with its Civil War-era oak trees, you were considered rich. Well, maybe not rich, but certainly better off than those of us raised on the

western side of town. Grand Boulevard, the only almost four-lane road in the city, split north Greenwood and separated the poor from the more affluent, or so it was thought. My street, Eighth Avenue, consisted of post-World War II homes that were less than a thousand square feet of enclosed living space. Dad had built the little living room of our house so we could say we had one. The covered front porch was the only one on our street and made our house stand out from the rest.

"Hold your head up. You're going to be okay; I just know it. You have to start somewhere; so, I think you should take Mr. Miller's offer. He knows you and likes you, or he would never have called your dad. Besides, the job is a lot more respectable than you playing music in every Delta honkytonk around or that dance hall place you play in Conway, Arkansas, all the time. There's no life in beer-joint music. How would you ever raise a family? You'll want a family someday. You are considered to be an adult now; so, take that job. Start making you a little living and see what comes up—you just never know."

She stood up from the table, hugged me, kissed my father, then walked into her kitchen saying, "Now that's enough advice for tonight; it's getting late. I'll get us all some of this apple pie; I'll put a little vanilla ice cream on top; we'll eat that up, then go to bed. Tomorrow's a new day, and rest will help us all to face it."

She was right, as usual. The dish was delicious, and I slept like the dead until I heard my father making coffee at five-thirty the next morning. After eating breakfast, they told me to have a great day and relax, but to call Mr. Miller regardless so he would not be wondering what to do about me. They left for work like they had done for years, at seven a.m. At eight a.m., I went to see Mr. Miller.

Around eight-twenty that Tuesday morning in May of 1970, I entered the Leflore County Health Department building. Bypassing the empty reception desk, I walked straight to Mr. Miller's office where I found him talking to Dewey Robinson.

"I was just leaving," Robinson said as he hurriedly rose from his chair. "And good morning, too. I got a bitch of a day ahead, so I better get going. Good to see you, and we'll get properly introduced to each other later, if that's okay. I just need to get moving now."

“Likewise, Mr. Robinson. See ya later then.”

“Ha! Dewey Robinson ain’t had a bitch of a day in a while. Good morning, Wade. We've made a decision, have we? Or do you want to talk some more?" Miller said as he finally greeted me.

“Mr. Miller, I’ll tell you straight up, sir. This sanitation job is not what I dreamed I would ever be doing after four years of college, but if you will have me, I promise that I'll work hard for you."

“Wade, if I thought you wouldn’t, you would not be getting the offer. I’m damned glad to have you. Now you get ready to sign some paperwork later this week, okay? Then get yourself graduated in June, and be here and ready at eight o’clock in the morning on July first.”

Then he stood up, and we shook hands. About nine o’clock on Friday, May 22, 1970, we signed all the forms needed to get me started. I would bury my father that same date thirty-seven years later. In four short years, I would become Mississippi’s first state director of emergency medical services, a title I would keep until October 15, 2000.

Chapter 9
Test

The first step taken toward credentialing pre-hospital personnel in Mississippi was the administration of the National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians (NREMT) examination in Tupelo in December of 1972. John Reilly and I gave the exam to a small class at the Tupelo branch of Itawamba Junior College. We knew little about the National Registry other than its creation two years earlier. To us, it was just a test created by persons outside of the college that would serve to evaluate the state's initial EMT class. We did not understand that, even though the NREMT was in its infancy, this was paving the way toward national credentialing of EMS. We couldn't anticipate that this organization would later partner with our state, making Mississippi one of the first states to adopt the National Registry as the standard for EMS credentialing and reciprocity. Nor could I understand that this trip with its subsequent events would solidify my career in public health. So, we gave the test with no problem encountered and retired for the evening.

In the motel restaurant, I waited for John. He seemed always to be notoriously late, and this rainy December morning was no exception. We had planned before retiring to our rooms the night before to meet at seven a.m., grab a quick cup of coffee, and start the long trip back to Jackson—not because we had pressing appointments, but because we both dreaded the trip down the Natchez Trace Parkway. Trips up the parkway never seemed as long as trips back. The Trace was and remains beautiful, but boring. Besides that, it was only a few days until 1972's Christmas Eve, and we wanted to get back, basically to get off for the holidays.

It was already seven-fifteen and I needed something more than coffee but didn't know what. I reviewed the menu and ordered, partly due to the smell of breakfast that flavored the room. Shortly, my request arrived. The cheese omelet looked fantastic and the waitress, who reminded me of a country singer from the1950s, delivered a fresh cup of coffee and a newspaper, compliments of the Tupelo Ramada

Inn. Given her hairstyle, I assumed that she liked and wanted to look like Patsy Cline.

Likely made with real hoop cheese, I thought as I carefully buttered the grits and biscuit. Dedicated to this beautiful meal and blessed with the solitude, I frankly hoped that John had overslept. Not until the waitress brought the third cup did I think about John again.

"Honey, can I get you anything else?" she asked.

"No, ma'am, I'm about to float off as it is."

"The potty is around the corner," she giggled. "Excuse me for being nosey, but my mama says I was born that way. Are you alone or waiting for someone?"

"A coworker, but he's usually late. And this morning, thanks to you and this great food, I don't care; I am enjoying myself."

"Good, sweetie. Now, I know you ain't from Tupelo 'cause everybody local comes through here to eat or go to the bar. We have good food, and our dance bands are fun, as can be some of our ladies," she said with a wrinkled wink. "They mix it up, you know, with different music, not too much of that ole country stuff. God, that music makes me depressed."

Okay, not Patsy after all; just bad taste in hairstyles, I thought.

"No, we are from Jackson and need to be on our way back now."

"Tennessee or Mississippi? You know that there's a Jackson in Tennessee, too."

"No, it's Mississippi alright. I guess I assume everyone knows that, but they don't."

"What y'all do?"

"We work for the State Board of Health."

"No! You gonna write me up for not having on a hair net while serving food? Don't need that to happen, darling. This is about all this country girl can do except for. . . well, anyway, I don't need no trouble."

"That's a different department; we work in emergency health. We gave the first National Registry test in our state last night to the EMT class from Itawamba Junior College."

"You did? You old enough to be givin' or should you be taking, if you know what I mean."

"I guess the state thinks I'm old enough at twenty-four; they sent me up here with this federal guy and are paying me to do it."

"Wow, I'm not too far ahead of you, in age I mean; just turned 40 and love to boogie. Give me a dance sometimes?"

"Truly, I'm flattered, but married. The travel part of my job is hard enough on us newlyweds; I don't need to complicate things, but I'm sure that you understand. Besides, something tells me that I couldn't keep up with you, anyway."

"Well, when you get over it, come back to see me! And what's an EM-whatever anyway?"

Just as I started to explain, mercifully, John walked up, ready to go. I didn't question him about his detention but thanked the waitress and asked for my check instead. John never talked much, and he was quiet through the motel check-out process. It wasn't until we got into his Dodge Hornet that he said anything to me.

"Sorry your lap belt is broken; you will have to trust my safe driving record. By the way, did I ever tell you that I hate Christmas; it costs me a fortune."

"You should have thought about that, John, before having all those kids. What's the tally so far? Five with another on the way? And then there's your religion."

John was a devout Catholic. He had almost become a Jesuit priest but backed out before he was ordained, much to the displeasure of his Arizona family. They were wealthy owners of a funeral business and having a son as a priest figured heavily in their plans, but I was only guessing because he never gave me a reason why he quit. The only thing that he had discussed with me about his family in detail was how his father was embalmed and his assistance to that procedure, how he would look "natural" in future years if ever exhumed by archeologists. I always thought that dead people looked like dead people, period; no matter what.

"Okay, I do not need any of your Southern Baptist philosophy this morning."

"I am Methodist, thank you very much!"

"What's the difference? Anyway, it could be worse; Bradshaw could be with me instead of you, not that I like you, either. At least you kneel in the presence of God in his house."

John never liked Doyle, and I do not know why to this day, other than Doyle seemed to take great pleasure in arguing with John about everything, especially about religion, but the subject didn't matter. And Doyle was Baptist, which to John was like sunlight to a vampire. Even in the office I never knew who was first with the garlic, John or Doyle. But John always seemed to tolerate me, probably due to my Mississippi Delta heritage. He was fascinated with my presence during the civil rights days in my hometown of Greenwood. Although I had told him repeatedly how the media had exploited the truth, he had visions that somehow the dogs used for law enforcement and shown on the national press as attack dogs were, in fact, mine. And some days I wanted him to believe those myths.

"All churches are households of God, are they not?"

"Wade, I do not feel like sparring with you; we have a four-plus hour drive in the rain ahead of us. I still have holiday issues to deal with; I assume that you do as well. So, meditation time is at hand."

And with that, I settled in for the long trip home down the Trace.

The Natchez Trace Parkway is a two-lane, 444-mile federal highway that connects Natchez to Nashville, Tennessee. Commonly known as "The Trace," it was federalized to commemorate the centuries-old trail. After the first trip, most people find the road too slow and boring to take again. After all, how many times can a person comment on the beauty of dying tree leaves?

On the other hand, the Trace is a historian's dirty book; they can't seem to get enough of its travel significance and stories. The death of Meriwether Lewis, of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, on the Trace at Grinder's Stand in Tennessee is still being debated. But to routine Trace travelers, it is a pain in the behind at fifty miles per hour, especially returning from Tupelo to Jackson during the 'I want to be at home season.'

About two hours into our southward drive home, an event occurred that firmly established my professional destiny.

I am sure that John was close to the Trace speed limit when the right front tire of his little car grabbed the soft road shoulder. Making the mistake that many drivers make daily, he jerked the steering wheel to the left in an attempt to right the car on the wet pavement. The correct reaction would have been to decrease the speed of the vehicle, with minimal braking, until safe to maneuver back onto the road surface. His action caused the vehicle to lose traction and begin to spin. I remember how helpless I felt realizing that we were out of control and headed for the big pine trees that lined both sides of the parkway. As the rear of the vehicle came to the front of our slide to the opposite side of the road, I fell to the floor in a ball. It flashed through my mind that, unbelted, that position was likely my only chance at minimizing the possibility of being thrown out of the car. I remember hearing John scream, "Oh shit!" then—in an instant and with a loud noise that I still cannot adequately describe—it was over.

When I awoke, I thankfully discovered that I was, in fact, still in the car with all my appendages and didn't seem to be bleeding. I don't believe I was unconscious long, but

I remain unsure. I felt numb but was able to move. I turned to find John, but the pine tree that had slammed in between us made it difficult. To make matters even worse, the front seat had been ripped from its support and now rested upside down in what was left of the rear seat area. Eventually I spotted him, still belted in, though he was hanging upside down and unconscious. Yelling out to him, I crawled over the seat and felt for a pulse. Thanks be to God, he still had one. During this process, I felt the pain surface across my back.

Months later I would be told that my fetal position during the crash helped save me but caused the seat to be dislodged. I would also learn that I took the brunt of the collision on my back as the car struck the tree center of the rear, which likely helped spare us as well. Pictures of the crushed inverted vehicle and the scene served as confirmation.

I knew that I could not help John and that I needed to get out to find help. I remember kicking on the passenger side door until it opened. I tried to stand as I got out but collapsed in pain. It seemed to be raining harder as I lay there, trying to not panic. I don't know how long I remained looking up in the roadside grass, but I'll never forget

the rain on my face and hearing car doors slamming. I felt blessed that I had survived and was able to handle anything.

A girl and her boyfriend suddenly were staring down at me, asking me about my condition. They were Ole Miss students going home for the holidays and first on the scene. I heard another voice from another stopping vehicle.

"Hey, do you need help?"

The male student responded: "Please drive to a phone and call the park rangers; two injured. One is still in the car and not moving!"

"Okay, good luck. I'll call as soon as I can find a telephone."

I was slowly regaining enough composure to speak to both.

"Thanks for stopping; please see how John is but do not try to move him; you'll need help."

"No thanks needed, but we don't know what to do; can you walk?"

"No, my back is hurting; I may have a fracture. If you don't smell or see gas, I need just to lie here until help arrives. Please see about him."

"I will; baby, stay with him while I take a look; do we have an umbrella in the car?" she spoke for the first time.

"No, but there's a blanket. We can at least hold it over his face and try to block the rain."

"Good, I'll get it and check that guy. God, I hope this doesn't take too long; we are helpless."

As he disappeared around the car, she dropped to her all fours and placed her body over my face shielding all of the rain that seemed even harder now. UM was imprinted on the now-soaked jersey she wore. A most beautiful site, I thought; the University of Mississippi, absolutely beautiful!

"The blanket is not there, and the guy is tangled in the seatbelt and looks in bad shape! What can we do? Shit, do I need to help cover him up with you?"

"What else, at least he's talking to us. Wait, I hear a siren; thank God."

A park ranger had not been called but had seen the cars on the parkway and stopped to investigate.

"Officer! We need help; thanks for being so fast!" yelled the boyfriend.

"What's the problem?" he asked as his Smokey the Bear hat appeared over my face.

"This man is hurt," Miss UM said before I interrupted.

I said, "Ranger, these folks are doing a great job, but I need you to get an ambulance; John, my coworker, is not responding to anything; I am hurting all over, and I think my back may be broken. Can you call for help?"

"No, but I can call the station and get them to call for help. Hold on."

It seemed like an eternity passed before anyone said anything again. Sleep felt good until I felt Miss UM slapping me.

"Hey, don't you f'****n die on me, wake up; please wake up!"

"I am awake, did I pass out?"

"God, where have you been? I thought I had let him die" she asked of the boyfriend as he reappeared.

"No umbrella and no blanket; the guy in the car is in real trouble; shit, how'd we get into this?"

"Y'all are great," I said. "Is the rain gone?"

"Looks like it," Miss UM said as she rose from her stance over me.

The ranger said, "The call is made, and they said they knew about it and help is coming from Kosciusko."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"About 11:40; nearly lunch time! Why, are you hungry?" he asked.

"How long have we been here? I don't remember when we wrecked?"

"I've been here about 10 minutes; don't know about you two."

"For eternity," Miss UM squealed.

"Baby, it's only been about thirty minutes. But sir, why? Help's finally on the way."

Sir? I'm twenty-four, and he called me sir?

"Response time; I want to know the times so I can see how fast we get to the hospital."

"I don't understand, but it has been around 30 minutes since we stopped; don't know how long y'all were here after your wreck. Do you?"

"Not exactly; I think I passed out after we hit the tree."

The ranger said, "The response from these guys from Kosciusko could be anything; they fight each other when they have been drinking. It's not a pretty picture."

He went on to explain how squabbling brothers had split an auto parts store and an ambulance business once owned jointly. He said that they fought constantly and had been known to shoot at each other on occasions. Now each one had an ambulance business, and they raced to scenes. According to the ranger, they both were candidates for jail time.

"Well, that's what John and I are trying to fix. We work for the State Board of Health in emergency health services. We are planning to improve what we now call ambulance service. You know, training for the people working as ambulance staff, what equipment they should have, etc."

The ranger continued, "These two brothers are trained Attala County rednecks, doubt that they know much else."

"I hear a siren, thank God!" the boyfriend yelled.

And I did, too. Lying there, the shock of it all was starting to pass. What I had just experienced, in a strange way, was comical. I am sure that it wasn't funny to John. Little did I know, as I listened to the siren getting closer, that the situation was going to get worse than I ever could have imagined.

The ranger began yelling, "Everybody, please get back from the side of the road; this fool is coming too fast, and this road is still wet. He's gonna slide!"

And he did: right by the scene. I can still remember how the tires looked at ground level as they slid by us. I could hear all the people who had now gathered gasp in disbelief that somehow the vehicle that was sent to help us could have killed us all. I could hear the tires of the car spinning as the driver turned around in the middle of the two-lane Trace. Finally stopped, the driver parked alongside us and got out.

"What ya got here, Mr. Law Man?" the driver said as he opened up the back of his high-top station wagon.

"I got a ticket book for you, but we first need to get these men off the road and to the hospital. Come here and look at the man in the car. He's pretty bad."

"Well, this what happens to you if you drive too fast on this old Trace, 'specially when it's been raining like a cow peeing on a flat rock, heh, heh. Pick up dummies like this every day. Let me get a stretcher."

Returning with a metal stretcher, he spoke to me for the first time.

"Can you scoot on or have I got to tote you?"

"I can move, but my back's killing me. Please see John first. Please."

"Don't start with no orders, I'm in charge now," he said as he grabbed me by my belt and pulled me onto the metal stretcher. "Officer let's git his ass into the ambulance; we'll have him out of the way and one less fool to deal with."

They picked me up and slid me and the stretcher onto what looked to be an improvised shelf on the right side of the vehicle interior. Then they pulled the stretcher with wheels from the vehicle and returned to John. I could not see what they did to remove him from his entanglement, and today I remain thankful that I couldn't. At the time, I did not know the extent of his injuries, but I was sure about our rescuer… an idiot with no training. I could only imagine what contortions they were putting John through to get him out of his car and onto the stretcher. I prayed that his neck was not broken. Thankfully, he remained unconscious through the ordeal.

"Just roll him in, and I'll git 'um to the hospital," the driver said to the ranger as together they lifted the stretcher with John aboard.

With the door closing, I heard the ranger giving the driver a stern warning to never speed to another scene with him present or an arrest would be next. Shortly, the vehicle began to move. As the car started to accelerate, I felt very strange: thankful to be alive and on the way to medical attention, sorry that I never would know the names of those that helped us, and scared as I was experiencing all that was wrong

with the emergency care field. At that moment, I decided to get very serious about my job.

The vehicle was a modified station wagon. The rear side windows were marked in red letters that spelled out Attala County Ambulance. John was breathing heavily and still unaware of anything. As the pace of the pine trees passing by the windows increased, I turned in an attempt to see the speedometer. I guess the driver saw me in his rear-view mirror.

“Well the hell, it can move! What tha’ shit you trying to do boy?”

"How fast are you going? We just got pulled off one tree, and I don't care to go through that with you."

“Told you back there; I’m in charge. Now lay down and shut the fuck up!”

“Mister, we are from the Mississippi Board of Health and know a little about your business. Just slow down and get all of us there alive.”

“Don't care if you're from Mars, just shut up, or I'll stop the car and beat your ass.”

About then is when John’s stretcher began to roll back, slamming into the rear of the vehicle. The stretcher had a locking device for each wheel, and the driver had failed to engage them when they loaded John. I reached out with my right arm and grabbed the side rail of the stretcher in an attempt to stop the roll.

“He ain't goin' nowhere, the back door's locked. Besides, it ain't but about eleven more miles to the hospital.”

“That’s a long way when you are hurting and getting bumped around on a rolling cot at ninety-plus miles an hour. Now stop this damned car and fix the wheel locks before something awful happens to him!”

“If I stop, it’ll be to whip your ass. Just hold on.”

And that is precisely what I did until the “shelf” supporting the leg area of my stretcher gave way, sending me to the floor. Lying on my side on the floor, the stretcher resembled a lean-to, the upper portion still attached to the interior wall of the vehicle.

“Goddamit, I told you to quit ass'n around. Now, look what you have screwed up. The hospital's just a few blocks now; maybe I can git rid a y’all. Stay down!”

"Like I can do anything else; just get us there."

As he backed up to the emergency room, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. Then thankfully the vehicle came to a stop as the rear door opened.

"Good God, one of 'um is on the floor," said a big black man with the driver at his side.

"Yeah, and his fault for not doing what I said. Smart ass state employee. This one thinks he's somebody special."

"What are the two of you doing? Get these patients inside!" stated emphatically from a middle-aged lady with a nurse's cap pinned to her shortly-cropped black hair. "An ambulance driver and an ER aide ought to know that the patient always comes first. Y'all can yack later. Are these from the wreck up the Trace?"

"Yes ma'am; got 'em all by myself a little while ago, no thanks to the people in my way out there," the driver answered.

"Get them loaded and inside. What's wrong with them?"

Pointing to me, the driver said, "This one is whining about his back; the other one is knocked out cold as a wedge. Ain't no blood so it can't be much. So, get your ass out and get on this man's ride."

I quickly obeyed, anxious to escape and lie down on something soft with a pillow. The ER aide rolled me into the entrance to the emergency room as another female passed by with a stretcher for John. Again, I was glad I couldn't see how they handled John but hoped that it would be better than what I imagined had happened on the scene.

Inside, I started to feel saved as they wheeled John by me into a treatment room.

"Doctor needed in the ER stat!" announced the hospital intercom.

Then I realized that I was alone in what looked to be a hallway adjacent to John's room. I didn't remember the aide's leaving my side, but at least I was somewhat comfortable and out of the ambulance from hell. Compared to me, John did appear in worse condition. Still fully dressed in my wet light-brown suit, I struggled to get my necktie off; I wondered if someone had finally thought to remove his.

After an underdetermined but brief time, hospital staff passed me by as they scurried into the room with John. Then I passed out.

I awoke to "Honey? Honey? Who are you and what are you doing alone in this hall?"

She looked like she worked in surgery: robust appearance in dark green scrubs with the standard hairnet head cover.

With slurred-by-sleep speech, I answered, "I was in a car wreck."

"Oh my God! Have you been out in this hall all of this time? That was nearly two hours ago. Let me get you some help." She vanished; I never saw her again.

A few minutes passed before I was greeted by a very young nurse who stated that she had been directed by an OR nurse manager to assist me.

"And what is it that I can do for you?"

"You could tell me why I'm in this hospital if I don't need care. I figured that any person delivered to a hospital by an ambulance because of the car wreck they had been in hours ago should expect care."

"Oh, you have not been seen by anyone?"

"No, ma'am, and I need to let my office in Jackson know what has happened; they are probably wondering why we are late. Now can you help me?"

"Sure can!" And she pushed me to a pay phone that was located down the hall and said.

"You can call on this phone. Gotta quarter?"

In total disbelief of all that was still transpiring, I answered, "Yes, but would you dial the operator? I can't reach it."

"Sure! While you talk, I'll see where a room is open and find a doctor." Then she walked away after dialing.

During those times, state agencies didn't readily accept collect phone calls; I don't know about today. After I yelled over the operator's voice to our secretary to take the call, she did.

"Wade, is that you?" Eunice Wade asked.

"Yes, and thank God you took it; that was my last quarter."

"What are you talking about? And you better help me stay out of trouble with Mr. Williams; you know we can't take collect calls."

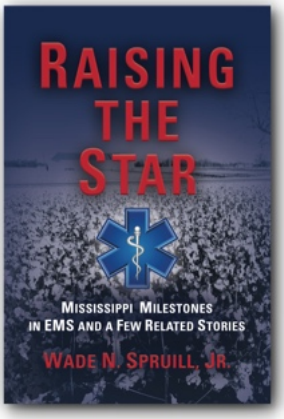
"Eunice, listen a minute, please; John and I have been in a car wreck on the Trace. Is Mr. Williams or Doyle in the office? I need to tell them what is going on and get families notified."

"My goodness! Doyle is; are y'all hurt?"

"Okay, please get him; we are in the hospital in Kosciusko."

We survived. Doyle, wife, and other agency employees retrieved me later that evening in one of the Board of Health's vehicles, undiagnosed lumbar spine fractures and all. John was transported by hearse the next day to UMMC in Jackson where he was treated for a stretched optic nerve and cervical spine trauma.

Until my retirement from the Department of Health in 2000, John called me every year on the anniversary of our wreck. Every call briefly reviewed the previous year's developments in our lives, but the details of the crash were thoroughly relived each time. We never discussed the historical significance of the first National Registry examination for EMTs in Mississippi.



Raising the Star, Mississippi Milestones in EMS and A Few Related Stories is a creative non-fiction/memoir written by Wade N. Spruill, Jr. Using personal and never before told stories, Spruill reviews some of the most significant milestones related to the development of the nationally recognized/respected Mississippi EMS and Trauma Care Systems.

Raising the Star

Mississippi Milestones in EMS and a Few Related Stories

by Wade N. Spruill, Jr.