
**Wandering
Back-Roads
West Virginia**

Volume 1

with Carl E. Feather

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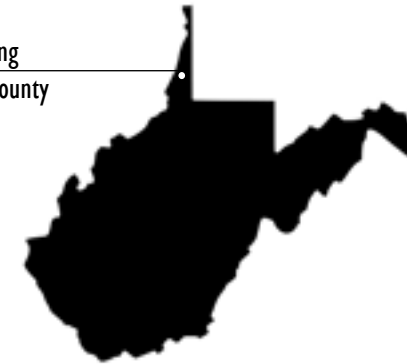


Charles Waldrum pushes one of his bicycles down a damp alley in Wheeling as he begins his night shift as the community's vigilante. December 2012.

Chapter 6

Walking Wheeling with Moon Dog

Wheeling
Ohio County



I first met Moon Dog on a rainy December evening in 2012 at Wheeling's 16th Street Convenience Store. You could find him there around dusk as the legendary vigilante Charles Waldrum stocked up on refreshments before commencing his nocturnal rounds.

Most Wheeling folks assumed that this large, bearded man who aimlessly peddled a bicycle around their town was homeless, but Charles had an apartment in one of the old brick structures on Lane 13. His neighbor, Janice Reed, told me he was a responsible tenant but played the radio too loud for her tastes. The blaring music aside, she found comfort knowing that he was a shout away. "He helps me watch over my house; he's a nice neighbor. I like him," she told me.

Charles had worked "at least 15 jobs" before he found his purpose as a full-time, night-time vigilante. He carried a huge flashlight and defended himself with a broom handle wrapped with duct tape as he pedaled/pushed one of the hundreds of bicycles he owned in his three decades of uncompensated service. Two fiberglass poles at the back of his bicycle rose

high into the air and displayed flags ranging from Old Glory to those of other nations.

“I got 283 flags,” he told me. “You put them on (the bike), then you can’t pick up the bike with all that weight on there. I got another bike at home that has 592 flags on it, and it is so heavy I can’t ride it. I just leave it inside the house.”

His decorated bicycles were a mainstay in Upper Ohio Valley parades. Charles peddled the ponderous velocipedes as far as Martin’s Ferry and Moundsville, West Virginia, and St. Clairsville, Ohio, to ride in a procession.

“He (loves to ride in parades) because he loves kids,” Kathie Loos told me. “It’s because he’s a kid himself.”

Despite being a fixture at these processions, in 2011, Charles Waldrum was excluded from the Wheeling Chamber of Commerce Christmas Parade. That made the “town go crazy,” said a friend. The decision deeply hurt Charles, who was later invited to be grand marshal for the 2012 parade. He accepted the invitation if he could transfer to his bicycle and ride at the end of the parade after the marshal’s unit completed the route.

“The parade is not over until we see Moon Dog behind Santa,” a Wheeling business owner told me.

Charles’ persona reached cult status in 2008 when the Wheeling Nailers produced a Moon Dog bobblehead doll. The collectible marked a memorable event in Waldrum’s life; he tossed out the puck at a hockey game in the WesBanco Arena. Only 2,500 of the noddies were produced.

“You got to go on eBay to get one of them things,” Charles told me four years later. “They get a lot of money for them, over \$100.”

The Nailers organization offered him a royalty, but he didn’t want it, according to Sheryl. That’s the way he lived; money was meaningless to him, and he preferred to make his own way, be his own person, in a world that rewards conformity. Charles Waldrum was eccentric, independent, and quirky, but not greedy.

The night I walked the streets of Wheeling with him, Charles told me about “a whole bunch of money” he had stashed away in a container and buried in a hill. “Nothing can hurt the money,” he said. “That thing is way down in the ground. It’s bigger than I am.”

Only Charles knew the stash’s location, and if it was just legend or fact. He lived as if the latter were true.



Charles Waldrum, aka Moon Dog, December 2012.

“A lot of people out on the street, he will just hand them money,” Sheryl told me. “And he will not take money from other people.”

If a child approached Charles, he would reach into a jacket pocket and produce a dollar bill for the youngster. He gladly purchased a soft drink for any child who asked him. Children felt more comfortable with the color of his skin and unorthodox lifestyle than those who hid their insecurities behind racial, economic, and social status slurs they hurled at him. Charles once told a reporter that the only way he could explain that kind of hatred was that those dishing it out must hate themselves, as well.

“I like little kids,” Charles told me. “I’m like a little kid at heart. You can’t take money with you, man. You know what I mean?”

Sergeant Bill Nolan of the Wheeling Police Department told me, “Moon Dog has a heart of gold. He really cares about people.” Jessica Yost, whose father owned the convenience store, told reporter Steve Novotney that Charles never hesitated to give a kid his leftover change so the youngster could buy candy or snacks. He was equally generous with his labors, assisting at the store and never asking for anything in return.

He was born September 18, 1958, one of 11 children of Mamie Walker and Charles Waldrum. He was reared in East Wheeling, where he attended public schools but did not graduate high school. He lived on a Social Security benefit that he began receiving when his father died.

Ask 10 Wheeling residents how he got his name, and you'll get as many different answers.

"We call him Moon Dog because he takes a bite out of crime," said Lance Miller, who owned Neely's Grocery, one of the Wheeling businesses on Charles' beat.

Randy Link, the city's postmaster, said he was told that the reason he got the name Moon Dog was because (of his looks) and he barked at the moon. Randy, who grew up in Wheeling, was a classmate of Charles'. With bold facial features, legs like oak trunks, and a beard that was trimmed but twice a year and never to the skin, Charles looked older than his age.

"He's been Moon Dog ever since he was a kid. I never heard of him being called 'Charles Waldrum,' but he's one of the nicest persons you ever want to meet," Randy told me.

Dick Clark, head clerk at the Main Street Knights Inn where I was staying, told me he immediately noticed this "guy riding around on a bicycle" when he first arrived in town back in 1975.

"I asked who he was, and (locals) said 'Moon Dog.' You just look for him; he's part of us now. He's quite the guy. You'll never meet another character like Moon Dog."

"He loves the name," said Cheryl Small, the neighbor and a former classmate from their school days in East Wheeling.

His brothers, Johnny and Jake, also claimed that Charles loved his nickname, although close friends called him "Moonie." Charles, however, expressed a different view to a reporter in another interview. "They started calling me 'Moon Dog' a long time ago, because I go out at night," he told Steve Novotney. "I go out at night because it's cooler. That's why. But I ain't no dog. I look for stuff that ain't right. I try to help because there are some bad people in this world."

Legend is Charles was once among the "bad" elements, allegedly setting an arson fire on Wheeling Island as a youth. He quickly realized the error of his ways and dedicated his life to assisting The Nail City's firefighters. His familiarity with the city and configuration of its aging buildings proved



Day or night, Charles Waldrum patrolled the streets of Wheeling on one of his many bicycles.

beneficial to the department. Wheeling Fire Chief Larry Helms told me that the department received a call about smoke in an apartment in the building in which Charles lived. As the firefighters contemplated how to break into the locked apartment, Moon Dog exited the front door. He



Charles Waldrum's neighbor, Janice Reed, felt secure living next to Moon Dog. Her only complaint about him was that the volume control on his radio was set too high for her tastes. December 2012.

had gone up a fire escape and through a window to access the smoke-filled apartment.

Wheeling Firefighters showed their appreciation for Charles's vigilance and assistance by giving him bicycles as the need arose. But Charles was fussy about what kind of bike he peddled and would refuse those that didn't meet his specifications. The city's firefighters also gave him decommissioned jackets. Wearing the heavy gear, pedaling his bicycle along one of the city's thoroughfares, Charles scoured the dark recesses of Wheeling

for suspicious activity and rattled business doors in the manner once common for urban beat cops.

"I've found 47 businesses that left their doors unlocked," Charles told me as we left the convenience store for his rounds. "I check on them day and night." Lance Neely said that Charles discovered an unlocked business door one night, reported it, and stood guard until the owner could arrive and secure the shop.

A vigilant watchman, he also spotted shoplifters and pointed them out to store owners. "One time someone was in here shoplifting, and he hurried over and locked the door and stood in front of it until the police came," Sheryl said.

"You got to be out there," said Charles, who saw himself as an extension of the city's professional crime-fighting squad rather than a freelancer. "He does his fair share," Sargent Nolan told me. "Moon Dog has been a fairly good asset for us."

"In my opinion, he's been an upstanding citizen," the sergeant said. "He's a very private individual, and it takes time to know him, to get him to open up."

The sergeant recalled his rookie days and walking the beat in the theater district. Charles was observing the activity from an alley, and pedestrians unfamiliar with him gave the vigilante a wide berth. Some expressed their angst to the future sergeant.

"I told them that if there were any person who was looking out for their safety in the city, it was Moon Dog. He will do whatever he can to help you in any situation," he said.

Charles witnessed and attempted to stop drug deals, muggings, fights, robberies, and arsons while on patrol. "I've broken up a lot of fights and stuff in downtown Wheeling," he said.

He memorized the location of each payphone in Wheeling, so he'd know the shortest distance to reporting a crime or fire in progress. In June 2012, Charles heard gunshots near a convenience store at 1:30 a.m. He summoned police to an attempted murder. During another patrol, he saw a female arsonist running out of the back of a store building.

"I told her to stop. She got in the car and took off, then I saw the fire," he said. "She'd put down a lot of gasoline in the store. I told the fire department everything."

Charles showed up at virtually every fire scene and attempted to assist firefighters. The fire chief told me that when he was a rookie firefighter, they were responding to a fire on Wheeling Island when the truck passed Charles' convenience store headquarters. As the firefighters began attaching hoses to hydrants, Charles arrived on his bicycle.

"He used to be pretty quick back then," the chief said.

The only things that kept Charles from his rounds were deep snow and heavy rain. Even a large, painful cut in his left foot did not prevent him from patrolling during our night of wandering about Wheeling. He wore a tennis shoe on his right foot and a bandage on the left. Despite walking through some rough sections and packing an expensive Nikon DSLR, I felt safe with Charles in the lead.

"There is nothing to be afraid of out there," Charles told me. "I've been punched, and I got beat up. And I take a lot of names. You can't trust nobody out there. You got to keep everything on your mind."

For those who earned the trust and friendship of Charles Waldrum, they received the gift of knowing a legend. Indeed, Charles treated his friends like royalty. A couple of weeks before Christmas, he surprised Sheryl Small and her coworker at the convenience store with ornate picture frames.

"This is my man; I love him," Kathie Loos said. "He's my 'Boo'—that's what we call him. He's a very thoughtful person."

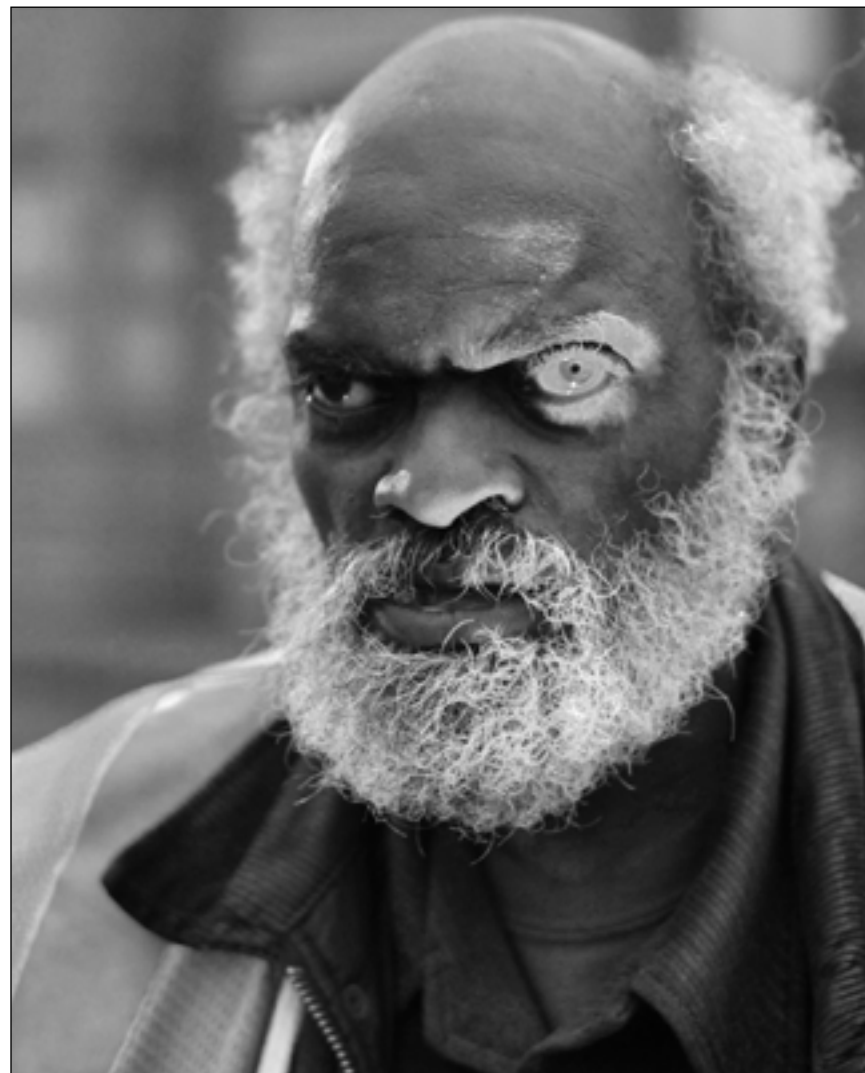
"Someday I'm going to be his wife. I love him," Sheryl said. "But he won't marry me."

I asked Charles why he had not popped the question.

"You marry her," he quipped.

Our paths crossed a few more times when I visited Wheeling, but nothing like that night when I trailed him for several hours through the streets that glistened with the mix of sodium-vapor security lamps and blinking Christmas lights. He was probably the most photogenic person I've ever pointed my lenses at, and I cherish the experience and memories.

Charles Waldrum no longer patrols the streets of Wheeling. According to a *Wheeling Intelligencer* article published December 19, 2020, Charles was recovering in Peterson Healthcare and Rehabilitation in Woodsdale following amputation of his right leg, the result of long-standing circulation issues brought on by diabetes. A year later, the online news source Lede News reported that he remained a resident of Peterson. In his mid-60s



Moon Dog, Charles Waldrum, December 2012.

and dealing with the realization that his patrolling days were over, Charles Waldrum, like all of us, was in need of some encouragement and validation that his life had purpose.