The Cornbread Mafia Part 1: A Homegrown Syndicate's Code of ...

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

cornbread, johnny, book, marijuana, kentucky, people, boone, hemp, marion county, lebanon, story, question, folks, sir, area, case, brown university, growing, prohibition, running

SPEAKERS

Question, James Higdon, Stuart Goldberg

Stuart Goldberg 00:01

Our speaker tonight is James Higdon, author of The cornbread mafia. He is a native of Lebanon, Kentucky. He was educated by the Sisters of Laredo. He holds degrees from Senator College, Brown University and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. He is the author of the nearly forgotten history of Portland, Kentucky, and works as a freelance journalist with battle lines and political magazine, Entrepreneur magazine, Esquire magazine and the Washington Post. Please join me in giving a warm Phil's Filson Welcome to Mr. Jim Hickman.

James Higdon 00:48

Hi, everybody so when there's questions later if I don't repeat the question for folks who need me to repeat the question through the microphone, just yell at me if I forget to, to repeat the question Did you just hear what he said. So thanks for having me. This is really great. Thank you to the for the, to the Filson for hosting us and class and up cornbread a bit. This is this is really nice digs for us. It was really great to be here in January for my Portland book as well. And that crowd was was really engaged and fun to to be with and spend some time with. When I was doing research for that Portland book, I did a lot of research all over the place and ended up in DC, doing research at the National Archives, and the Library of Congress and going through the Library of Congress to the relevant collections for history in this area. Every piece of relevant information i i came across it said at the bottom the Library of Congress entry, courtesy of the Filson Historical Society courtesy of the Pilsen his dog as a courtesy to Philly, I was like, Well, I just wasted a trip. So for folks who are doing that sort of historical research, if you're doing your genealogy work this, this place is a fantastic resource to begin and carry out some of that work. They've got really great firsthand materials, including handwritten manuscripts from from all over the place from this area. And so I really encourage you, if you're interested in doing historical research, the membership here is totally worth it. And then and then you get into these events to go along with it. So it's really a great deal in this institution is a great, a great thing to have in lieu of when we sort of take it for granted, but it's like a whole history department without a university attached to it. And that's, that's just a really great
resource for this community. I'm thrilled to be a part of it tonight. And then again on Thursday, because y'all sold this out. I don't know if you realize that, but you sold it out. And so we had a book as another spillover event. And that's crazy. So thank you very much. But I'm here to talk about cornbread tonight. So folks, have you who have seen me talk before you folks have seen me talk before show folks around here. So you know how this kind of goes. I just talk long enough to get y'all loosened up and chatty, and then I take q&a into the naked sleeve. So this is just kind of a talk about how cornbread came to be where we're at now this book that's now attended second edition, and this product space that we've entered into. No one thought I certainly did not think I thought when I started this book writing process back in 2006. When I started writing the book that the reason this would pay off like the book wasn't going to pay me anything but one day this would be made into a movie and then that would recoup the, the the time and resources that I put into the book writing process. At no point during that did I ever think that hemp would become legal at the federal level, which is a step towards full plant legalization and I would be able to be in a position to capitalize on that legality and enter in the product space. Folks, as you walked in downstairs saw cornbread hemp company is now alive and well for the first time legally in American history. We are selling corn bread products, and charging sales tax like it's a real thing now. So for folks who are new to hip for CBD stuff, if you have if you if you're curious if you have questions about that, feel free to get a hand up to talk about that as we talk about the book as well. They're one in the same it's the next chapter of the same story. I feel really humbled to be carrying on this tradition. That was that so many people sacrificed their time in their in their freedom to to keep going during the period of prohibition through the timespan that I cover in my reporting for the cornbread book that we're all more familiar with than we used to be. So that's kind of that's kind of it for folks who are new to the story could the cornbread mafia was first uttered in public by a federal prosecutor in Louisville in a press conference in June. of 1989. He called this group of Central Kentucky marijuana outlaw growers, the cornbread mafia, because among other things, it was the 70 men who were arrested on 30 Farms in 10 states with what law enforcement called 200 tons of marijuana. And of those 70, who were arrested, and none of them talked to law enforcement in exchange for a lesser sentence, and that frustrated federal law enforcement to such a degree that they were unable to run the sorts of prosecutorial cases against who they thought were the kingpins because there was no witness to point a finger at them. So consequently, the only thing that prosecutors were left with was the ability to call a press conference, which they did in June of 89. And when they did, they laid out their case against certain individuals associated with the cornbread who they alleged where the kingpins but gave no one an opportunity to defend themselves. And the local press ran with it. Lebanon, Marion County, already had somewhat of a reputation with local media at the time, for folks of you who were around who remember that sort of those sorts of things. The cornbread mafia was not the first time that Marion County found itself on the bad side of a news story. And it was just something that snowballed instantly bounced around the headlines coast to coast around the world, cornbread mafia, Marion County, Kentucky, and cause a large degree of, of anxiety in my community. My parents and the adults of my parents generation seemed first upset with people of their generation who had brought another round of bad publicity to Marion County, just when we had started digging ourselves out of the last round of bad publicity that we had. And eventually, it seems like that animosities sort of turned away from the people who had been arrested and towards the government in the media for blowing something out of proportion and for casting an entire community in a bad light. And making everyone feel like Marion County was this bad place just because a group of people decided that it would be a good idea to grow a bunch of marijuana and get away with it. Looking back, it seems like maybe they had the right idea. So I grew up hearing these stories about what was going on in cornbread days, I went to high school and lots of my high school peers, their parents had been their fathers or uncle's had been arrested as part of this. And so it was this sort of thing that was talked about,
of prohibition. So I went to go see Rosemary Peterson. Folks from the area know that Peterson done some of this research for the prohibition stuff. I started looking for living memory of me. Since no one talked to me for the marijuana stuff. I started going backwards and having to tell their story for the first time. When I started, of course, it was not easy. No one talked to me. Since no one talked to me for the marijuana stuff. I started going backwards and having done some of this research for the prohibition stuff. I started looking for living memory of prohibition with someone who was around for prohibition talk to me about growing up as a child of prohibition. So I went to go see Rosemary Peterson. Folks from the area know that Peterson and so I knew going, coming out of brown that these stories from home that I'd heard about growing up, they had some sort of currency, even with people who couldn't be bothered with anything else to do with Kentucky at all these stories kind of poked through that very heavy wall of bias against where I was from. And just when I moved to New York, I moved to New York with this idea that this is what I was going to do somehow. And I started trying to tell this story in fiction, I tried to tell it as a screenplay. And my imagination just was insufficient to cover the ground that of what really happened. And it wasn't until I got to Columbia Journalism School, that I realized how to dig into court records how I really realized how to do open records requests with law enforcement agencies, and realized how to start putting narrative together with documents and supplementing those documents with interviews of people that were involved. I realized there was a path forward how to do this, how to go about it and I died and I dove in. First year book reporting, no one talked to me. No one talked to me. No one talked to me all that stuff you read in the book about prohibition history, church history, cultural history going way back. That's all acts of desperation by me because no one talked to me. I had to wake up and do something I did that turned out to be really valuable and rewarding work, especially going through and looking at the Lebanon enterprise. hometown newspaper through the first or through the entirety the 13 years of prohibition week by week and pulling headlines from that time period of car chases gunfights, more car chases. It reads kind of like a comic book. Revenues leaping from the running boards of one moving vehicle onto another moving vehicle. car chases from Laredo to Perry Ville, gunfights, REO Speedwagon is like the whole thing that like, just fascinating stuff. And I figured out well, maybe all the small town newspapers read like this. And so I went next door to Springfield, and instead of car chases, it was all farm news and heart attacks. And that was basically it like, you know, so and so had a heart attack. And here's the weather. So that really put into into really clear focus that Marin County was a special place this culturally isolated bubble where this cultural Catholicism of, of self reliance existed in a way that really didn't exist anywhere else. And it was very easy to see how that culture that arose during Prohibition could still be alive. And well, a couple generations later, that would make cornbread with cornbread became, and those similarities between the headlines and Lebanon enterprise from the 20s. And the 80s. Were very clear, in fact, sometimes with the same family names, often with the same family names. And that really sort of put a framework around this book that when people finally did start to talk to me, it wasn't just it didn't just become a book about a true crime thing that happened. A couple of court cases, it became a cultural history of a place in which these crimes that these men committed were put into appropriate context where they never had been contextualized before. And I in the book gave these men an opportunity to speak for themselves in a way that the federal government in the media never allowed them to before. And so I feel very humbled to be had to have had that opportunity to allow some of these guys to tell their story for the first time. When I started, of course, it was not easy. No one talked to me. Since no one talked to me for the marijuana stuff. I started going backwards and having done some of this research for the prohibition stuff. I started looking for living memory of prohibition with someone who was around for prohibition talk to me about growing up as a child of prohibition. So I went to go see Rosemary Peterson. Folks from the area know that Peterson but in hushed tones. And it wasn't until I got away from home, I got to brown. And at Brown. I was looked at as sort of an anomaly no one Brown was Brown University is filled with very intelligent people who cannot find Kentucky on a map. Nor nor do they want to it's sort of this, you know, like, they're proud that they can't identify states that don't have a train line running through them. And so my nickname among a lot of these people was Kentucky just because I was the only person from Kentucky they had ever encountered. And they looked at me with a curiosity as if I was a talking dog, right, just amazed that I even existed. And it wasn't until I would talk about this cornbread stuff that I would get their attention. And they would say, wait a minute, wait a minute, what? And I'd say yeah, our drug dealers had lions, your drug dealers didn't have lions. And so I knew going, coming out of brown that these stories from home that I'd heard about growing up, they had some sort of currency, even with people who couldn't be bothered with anything else to do with Kentucky at all these stories kind of poked through that very heavy wall of bias against where I was from. And just when I moved to New York, I moved to New York with this idea that this is what I was going to do somehow. And I started trying to tell this story in fiction, I tried to tell it as a screenplay. And my imagination just was insufficient to cover the ground that of what really happened. 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farm, the Peterson farm is this big spread of land and Marion County on the border of Nelson. The entirety of maker's marks wheat supply comes from the Peterson farm, the Petersons. So I went to go see Mrs. Peterson to ask her what was it like to grow up? The son of a moonshiners? So I'd heard not that I know for sure. But so it's my understanding that maybe the way that her father had acquired this land was by running moonshine, and then turning that moonshine into cash and that cash into land. And maybe there was a story about him losing an eye by putting dynamite in a posthole, which he talked to me about that maybe I'm rambling on like I am with you with her trying to get some read on her. And she took my hand, she patted the back of my hand and she said, tell your mother and father I said hello. And that was it. Like so that was a very low day for me. And I'm not sure how I finished that day. But that was broad daylight when it happened. I guess I blacked out the rest of that day. So it was a slow march from there to getting those books finished. And the book takes the book writing getting the book published takes several twists and turns before it gets on the bookshelf into your hands. Took me a little longer to get done than it was supposed to. But then once it came out, and I started doing book events, I do a book of it in a library, I do a book and with a book club, I do a book event here. I do a book event there. Every time I go talk to a group, someone asks me from that group, would you come talk to my group here? Would you come talk to my civic organization? Will you come talk to our library, and I've been on a book tour ever since. And it's been a remarkable experience and opportunity for me to come into communities and come into homes and book clubs and talk to folks about sorts of things that most people don't talk about before I wrote a book about it around here. When I started writing this book, marijuana was still a dirty word. Now it's soon to and now it's medically legal and for of our border states. It's about to be recreational legal in Illinois. For anyone with friends or family in Paducah. You're about to be very, very close to legal marijuana. And so, you know, this this, this tipping point of this, of this particular issue has seemed to have come. We seem to be on the backside of a major tipping point with with the legalization of hemp in the Farm Bill from last year led in probably by Senator Mitch McConnell, but led by him nonetheless, encouraged by Congressman Jamie comer, as Ag Commissioner, really, none of this would have happened without Jamie comer as Ag Commissioner pushing this going back in 2012 13. He gets it done in 13. And then 14, the first farm bill. So without Jamie combers leadership, we wouldn't be here but then it was McConnell getting on board that really got this over over the line. It could be the case that Mitch McConnell has accidentally legalized marijuana. And that's something we can get into later. But once we crossed this tipping point where we say the before this farm bill, the hemp plant and the cannabis plant, the marijuana plant all all of this this plant was 100% illegal even the non psychoactive hemp ditch weed that grows wild out in the fence rows. But when McConnell gets the farm bill passed, the definition changes hemp becomes the cannabis plant with less than 0.3% thc. And all that becomes legal. Anything with more than 0.3% THC is still marijuana and illegal under federal law. Now 0.3 THC is in the basement, it is not a lot. But it's also not zero. And the USDA just issued a regulation that says THC derived from hemp is legal. So now the only difference in the world about THC legality is whether it comes from hemp or marijuana, whether it's legal or not legal. It opens up a whole swarm of questions that it seems like we're far away from answering, and it could inevitably lead to the full legalization of the plant. There doesn't seem to be any way back. And what now those doors open. It's allowed folks like me to enter into the hemp product space and to offer CBD products who have Oh my gosh. So I have I make hemp CBD products. They look like this now. And they're downstairs for sale. So 20% of use, it's not that it's not that kind of stuff. So it'll just be it'll just it'll just relax you after a couple of days. Oh, it's good for your arm yesterday. 20% of what we sell tonight is going back to the Filson. So feel free to fill generous. We're gonna give some back to the Filson for offering us this opportunity to talk to you guys tonight. And I'm sure I've talked long enough for a first question. Let's see hands. Yes, sir. I'm 42. That's a really easy one. Yes, ma'am. So can I talk about the change of laws and how it affected Johnny Boone sentence. So these are
two things. First, the sentence with Johnny Boone became a fugitive in 2008, because he was caught growing marijuana again. And that's the third strike was the third strike for Johnny. And as most folks know, federal laws, three strikes, and you're out. I don't know how a baseball analogy began to be used for life in prison without parole. But that's where we are. So that 2008 bus for Johnny was his third strike, which meant he was going to prison for the rest of his life without parole, which is, which is why one assumes he became a fugitive to get out of town because you know if that's it, why surrender, right? So he's on the run for eight and a half years caught in December of 2016, in a shopping mall, in downtown Montreal, Canada. And when he's come back, when he comes back, he doesn't take the first plea deal that's offered to him and forces the government to issue him a second deal where he pleads guilty to one charge for five years, including time served, which, considering what it seemed like he was up against seemed like a real sweetheart deal. Now, to answer your question. I don't think that changing laws had anything to do with the nature of Johnny's sentence. Those three strikes in your three strikes and you're out laws for marijuana are still on the books. So that law hasn't changed. So why did Johnny get a better deal than it appeared that he was supposed to get remains an interesting question. It seems like maybe as if a federal law enforcement in the room I thought that you were telling me now it seems as if the case against Johnny was maybe not as airtight as maybe they wanted it to be like maybe they had aerial photographs of his marijuana. But then when Johnny went running, they didn't get any samples. So there was nothing to test in a lab to say this stuff that they had pictures of was the stuff they said it was, or something. So it had to be something that made the government really, really not want to go to trial over. So the laws haven't changed. It was just something that something happened with the case while Johnny was gone. They wanted to resolve it. So they would stop being embarrassed by him. But not in a way that was as as but not by the book, something that something about that wasn't by the book, and I'm not sure exactly I don't think we will ever know exactly what that was just me was so knowledgeable and did so much different so the question is about Johnny Boone's ability to to crossbreed these strains of marijuana to become recognized as sort of a master horticulturalists in this field. So Johnny Boone is a genius. I've been to Senator Brown and Columbia and Johnny Boone is one of the smartest people I've ever met. It comes across pretty quick. Johnny did a lot of time in nonconsensual college like he was in college for a long time against his will. So Johnny read a lot of books. So he, he didn't have a stent, a traditional structure for understanding how those books fit together. But he had an understanding of of a wide variety of topics beyond his horticultural niche. Which is to say just that just start with Johnny was very smart is very smart. As a high school student, Johnny Boone was the first for a teacher to win a blue ribbon at the state four h contests and two separate divisions in two different years. You're supposed to focus on those things, but he won in tobacco one year and and sheep breeding the next because he's Johnny Boone. So Johnny was really bright. And then when someone started bringing seeds from other countries, he already had a reputation as being the person for that person to bring the seeds to these seeds are from Tibet, these seeds are from Afghanistan, these seeds are from all over the place. And they brought them in little paper cones, and Johnny would germinate them. And he would crossbreed them with local varieties and select them based on traits, and was really, really good at it. And so slowly, Johnny developed several strains of illegal marijuana native to this area, because he knew what he was doing better than anyone else. So it wasn't just that he had the audacious nature of growing things on a very large scale, which is also something that he did, but the quality of what he was growing was vastly superior because of his innate knowledge and in this space and his self taught ability to crossbreed this plant. Thank you. Yes, sir. Wow, okay. So keys have access to cornbread as at scale, like, how did it get so big? And how's this successful? Right? So, right, like, how do you? How do you distribute this kind of product at that kind of weight in that time period without getting caught? So the first part of this is that it's just after the Vietnam era. So several of these guys not Johnny Boone, John had a farm exemption if
seeds from various places around the world, particularly, by the way, Afghanistan. So with things that are in the public that things cases that had been adjudicated gone through the trying to tell. So I stick to the roadmap of the court cases and tell the story as best I can because I wasn't writing a book to try to get new people in trouble. That wasn't the story I was trying to tell. So I stick to the roadmap of the court cases and tell the story as best I can with with things that are in the public that things cases that had been adjudicated gone through the court system. But this part about Johnny Boone, crossbreeding marijuana strains and getting seeds from various places around the world, particularly, by the way, Afghanistan. So if you're the only male, if you only man on the farm, you get a farm exemption in the draft. So Johnny's on a farmer's exemption. But a lot of these guys are going to Vietnam and coming back. And in Vietnam, they realized what the value of marijuana is in cities. In other in other parts of the country, all you have to do is grow it and not get caught and not getting caught was what they did. Right. So they're already growing tobacco by the acre. So growing an acre of marijuana is just another acre of something else to grow by the acre. And at the beginning before helicopters hiding an acre or five acres was pretty easy because cops didn't know what they were looking for. And they didn't have helicopters to go look for it. And the Supreme Court hadn't yet given police the the ability to Trump through someone's private property without a warrant. So the drug war hadn't degraded individual freedoms to the point that they're degrading now. So part of it was just the government didn't know what was going on didn't know it was happening under their nose. And so it was easy to grow and scale on the supply side, because there, there wasn't helicopters looking to busted at first, helicopters didn't go up in the sky until 1980. I'll get to distribution in a second. But just to talk about supply. The first place that the Kentucky State Police flies a helicopter in Kentucky is over Marion County one week in 1980. And in one week, when one weekend, they found 45 acres of marijuana. For those of you who know what acres are. And those of you who know what marijuana is, that is a lot of both. On the distribution side, part of this goes back to their army connections, they've got military connections and all these different cities and places. All the way down to Florida and Key West all the way up into Maine all the way out west. Like they know people who knows people, they've got an instant, nationwide network based on army buddies, right? And and then how do you move the product. In retrospect, Lebanon, had way more used car lots than a town of its size should have. Because a used car lot is a great way to move cash, you got $10,000 transactions happening every day on the books, right? So you can just move transactions 10 grand a time on the books and everything looks fine. And then you can take so a late mile late model Lincoln Continental from like the late 70s, that trunk on that late model Lincoln, it'll hold about 150 pounds, or so I'm told. Now you take about eight of those Lincoln's and you put it on a car carrier. You've got a ton of marijuana and chunks of Lincoln's on a car carrier, and you can move that car carrier anywhere. And so I don't know that that's how they moved it. But you get an idea how they might move it. Yes, sir. Who is Mr. X? I love this question. Because I can't answer it. So in the book, I have a section in the book, we were talking about Johnny's mastery of horticulture, and that someone would bring him seeds from other places. And in the book, I refer to this person, as Mr. X, I go out of my way through the rest of the book, probably too much to get first and last names of everyone who is on the record, who's whose cases get adjudicated who to help tell the story beginning to end. As a journalist, that part was important to me. But what I learned in the course of this, but one of the lessons I learned was that just because something happened in the past, and someone had gotten away with it, and the statute of limitations had passed, doesn't mean that person would be free to talk to me about what happened. I thought if the statute limitation and past five year statute limitations, so that happened 30 years ago, that person can tell me what happened, right? Easy peasy. However, any property that person might have purchased through that period of time, is still inside the statute of limitation. And the federal government can come and seize that property because that property does not have constitutional rights like a person does. And then the federal government comes and seizes a piece of property and then they force the individual to prove that that piece of property was purchased in a legal way. For instance. And so that really limited my ability to tell the story as as fully as I would have liked his fully as I understand it, because I wasn't writing a book to try to get new people in trouble. That wasn't the story I was trying to tell. So I stick to the roadmap of the court cases and tell the story as best I can with with things that are in the public that things cases that had been adjudicated gone through the court system. But this part about Johnny Boone, crossbreeding marijuana strains and getting seeds from various places around the world, particularly, by the way, Afghanistan. So
Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush mountain range is on the 37th parallel on the other side of the world, and the 37th parallel comes right around to the southern border of Kentucky. And that means that the plants that originate from the Hindu Kush, really appreciate the light cycles in Kentucky. And that's something that Johnny Boone sort of recognized before anyone that these particular plants from this particular part of the world really like it here. Mr. X is the guy I, who brought him those seeds. But because Mr. X never got caught doing what he was doing, I couldn't use his name. And it frustrates me that I can't but I understand why I can't. And so as much as I write about maybe more than some people want me to write about, there's a lot that I learned through the course of my work that I was not able to write about. And mostly I just left that stuff out. But for the one part, I had to have something. And so I use Mr. X. Why did Johnny go to Minnesota? I don't know specifically, why Minnesota why he chose that farm. I know that. In that time period, the reason why they're going to other Midwestern states is because they're running from the helicopter. So the helicopter comes into Kentucky in 1980. And then everywhere after that, they're going to other parts of other counties in Kentucky, and then they're going to other states. And all of that is looking for good farmland in very sparsely populated areas, where there's no cops and no helicopters. And so I believe Johnny ended up with some some seeds that had a Russian origin. And so he thought they would grow good up north, and so he found a place up north to grow. He asked me did I ever feel intimidated or afraid? Yes. A story like this isn't worth writing if people don't want you to write it. Right. And coming into this, there has been a 20 plus year long code of silence surrounding it. And the guys that I wanted to talk even if they wanted to talk to me didn't want to seem to the other guys like they had rattled anyone out. So there was this very strong aversion to talking with me because talking with me the book was in their mind at first the same as talking to the police. So there was definitely some unhappiness, we'll call it with me starting out. The first time I got my life threatened writing the book was in Maine, I flew up to Maine early in the book writing process, because I knew to these guys the only case that were cornbread guys were busted inside of Marion County or the Pickett brothers in early 1989. And these guys from Maine who had been former customers of theirs, were federal informants who went down to make this buy bust. Usually a buy bust is a sort of thing that is sort of a type of police action that's beneath the DEA, but because nothing else worked, they decided to wire these guys up from Maine for a buy bust in Lebanon. So I went up to Maine to try to interview these guys about this experience that they had in Marion County. They thought one of them thought that I was there to kill him, apparently. So then he's threatened to kill me because that's what you do. And then a police officer called me while I was in my hotel room and said, What are you doing? Who are you? What are you doing? And I was explaining to him slowly what I was in this after the guy had threatened to kill me. And he said, Look, if you promise not to go to that house tomorrow, we don't have a problem. And I was early in this process. And so I told him, I wouldn't go to that house tomorrow. So that was the first time I got someone threatened to kill me. There have been a couple of more. Really, it's just, it's more invigorating than anything. Like when someone threatens to kill you, you really feel alive. Say that again. Thank you very much. I'm glad you're here too. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. So the question is about dill injure in the book and in and what's the sourcing on that? So I heard as a kid about this village stuff in Marion County, and like you, I just assumed it was all made up trash. Happens to be something that checks out. So I went through the delimiter biography and the timeline of Bill injure pretty well, and that all that stuff checks out. He was first locked up in Indiana. And while he was locked up in Indiana, he met someone from gravels which Marion County who told him if you need a place to hang out, but we don't have the place for you. And so dill injure in comes and hangs out in gravel switch that summer, I believe in 1933. And then at the end of that summer, He robs the gravel switch bank on his way out of town now, as you do at first the Lebanon enterprise. When reporting on villagers exploits the rest of his career as a bank rubber is sort of at first celebrates delineator as sort of a Robin Hood type. But then once Dylan jerk kills that police officer or the prison
cases is only part of the story. So it was persistence and having read the documents me, because all I've got is the roadmap that the police have left me, which in a lot of these times that's wrong. And a guy like Johnny or these other guys are like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, that's not that's not right. You can't write that. And I say, I know I can't. But I need your help. Unless you tell me what happened, how am I going to know? But I've got this. And so then they realize that in order to get me to do it, right, if I'm going to do it, they have to help me, because all I've got is the roadmap that the police have left me, which in a lot of these cases is only part of the story. So it was persistence and having read the read the documents
as best I could. And then once I get them on board as a living person, then I get them to agree to let me search their FBI and DEA records and state law enforcement records and I get police files, and then it gets really good. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Are you accepted? So once the book came out, how did it how did I How did I get accepted back in Marin County? What? Once the book was out, it was done right. There's no more threatening me because it's over. So it went over just fine. I think I think what you see from some, some folks that I write about in the book, having now begin writing their own books, I sort of cracked the seal on this code of silence and gave people permission to talk about these sorts of things. That had been sort of a well kept secret. So I think that I think that it went over pretty well, although, it depends on who you ask, I think is the short answer to that question. Let me think if I want to answer that. I saw him in a sentencing hearing. So yes. What was sort of? Okay, next question. Yes, ma'am. Is Johnny a descendant of Daniel Boone, so I don't think so. And here's why. One Johnny was not close with his father, his father's family. He was close to his. His maternal grandfather lived Walker Lane after his maternal grandfather, the land that he owned was his maternal side. So he wasn't close to his father's side. So that's not something that he knew himself. And subsequently Am I reporting my research on the Portland history book that I that was published about six months ago, I did a lot of work on the Daniel Boone squire Boone Family for that story, because Daniel Boone was in the falls of the Ohio area. Several times during during his adventures into Kentucky. both Daniel and Squire Boone and their families leave Kentucky. Towards the end, Daniel Boone dies in Missouri before Missouri's estate squire Boone sets up shop outside of court in Indiana to basically get run out of Kentucky in the land courts. Daniel Boone, despite having discovered Kentucky doesn't end up with any of that in his possession. He has to liquidate all of his valid land claims to pay the legal fees for his invalid land claims they get beat out of in court. So most of those boons are go now some of them come back. Distant cousins come back and end up in the Louisville area, Boone Square Park and Portland is named for first cousin, I believe. But I don't know that there's a lot of direct descendants of that Boone Family around in Kentucky much at all. Like I think most of that ended up in Indiana. Yes, sir. I'll come back to you. Yes, sir. So is Johnny Boone living? If so where is he? What's he doing? So Johnny Boone is living. He's in a minimum security facility in Ohio. Split halfway between Pittsburgh and Cleveland. His release date is February of 21. So that puts them in a halfway house about six months before that. So around Election Day 2020. Johnny should be in a halfway house and then cycle back into into polite society soon thereafter. Yes, sir. How old is Johnny he is M I know for sure. 73. Okay, so 7576 You were a freshman. He was a senior. Okay. Yes, sir. So John is the sentencia. Johnny has a big family. I don't know. Washington County is where he's from. So Part of when Johnny decided agreed to talk to me, one of the things he asked me to do was to leave his family out of it. He didn't want me bringing his family into stuff. He has a son that predeceased him and some other sort of tough things that happened in his family life that he didn't want dragged into the book. And so out of respect for him in that like talking about his family is not something that I like to do in public. But yeah, he hasn't. He comes from a big Catholic family and he has a big family.

Question 45:29

Yes, sir. Hardin County, yes. Or entail? There's some Hardin County action. I think there's one Hardin County case in the book. I know some other people from Hardin County into this line of work, you don't make the book.
But, you know, Hardin County is a unique place because Fort Knox is there. So it didn't change the nature of the town Radcliff area, it's sort of more homogenized and in an American national sense than any county around it because the army base so Hardin County is kind of a different animal than Lago Central Kentucky counties. Yes, sir. The main character?
Yes, sir. What? What happened with them? There were quite a few other players. So there's quite a few other players involved and what are they up to? A lot of these folks have have are working in the the new legal hemp industry, despite Despite attempts to keep former drug felons out of the hemp industry, a lot of these guys have found ways back in. So finally, the thing that they're good at, they're finally able to make a living out. So there's definitely some of these folks, the bigger brothers are in the hemp product space. As I told you, I'm making cornbread hemp products. Some of these other guys are have started a Vicodin boon, CBD line as well. So you know they're in there in the product space in growing and growing hemp. And what's funny about this hemp industry is that a lot of regular farmers are now getting into him for an alternative crop. And they really need the experience of some of these folks with cultivation convictions, to teach them what they're doing. And so I don't know that it's happened yet here in this state, but in other states where these were when marijuana goes legal and online, convicted felons, formerly incarcerated people who are outlawed from the industry because of wrongheaded laws saying that felons can't participate in the industry. They hire themselves off as consultants. So they're not allowed to touch the plant product but they can point to the license holder and say do this do that that's a male pull that plant that's a female leave that plant so there's a role for them on the consultancy side as well as on the license holder side if their felony is 10 years in their past and hopefully one day we can get that 10 year ban removed Yes sir. Did the cornbread mafia do business with the real mafia? I can't imagine that they did not although I do not have any clear indication that they did although I can think off the top of my head if they had connections who those would be but I don't have anything nailed down so that would be something I could speculate on in front of a microphone.

Hang on a second in the back first Okay

so the question is about Sally Dentons book The Bluegrass conspiracy and the connection to my both the cornbread mafia these two books go really well together. Like chocolate and peanut butter of Kentucky nonfiction crime. There is some overlap and I go over some of the work that she did in advance her story with some new information some some some new documents that I uncovered about the Harold Brown death, Harold Brown was the corrupt DEA agent who was involved in in the Bluegrass conspiracy. He also oversaw many of the arrests of many of the prosecutions of cornbread related busts in the early 80s. Before he was basically marched out of the DEA because it was so obvious that he was corrupt. The distinction between that bluegrass conspiracy stuff and the cornbread stuff is that the Bluegrass conspiracy stuff alleges a conspiracy at a very high level involving government agents working for intelligence organizations, moving plane loads of first marijuana and then cocaine In from Latin America into Kentucky for distribution so that intelligence operations could be funded without congressional knowledge or consent. So that's a very high level sort of Operation cornbread existing below that in the grand scheme of things, but then sometimes interacting with each
other in various sort of natural ways that the illegal marketplace interacts with itself, buyers and sellers back and forth. Sometimes these cornbread guys were used by the Bluegrass conspiracy guys as assets to move product. Sometimes he ended up at the same parties together at a neither Madden’s house and Lexington. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that. So tangentially connected but not directly connected, if that’s helpful. Thank you, sir. Oh, yeah, so where they’re where they’re where their dead ends, am I reporting that I got down up to a point and really wanted to say this happened, but couldn’t say there were a lot of those like Mr. X is one of them. But Mr. X, I had a had to tell that part of the story because it was critical to the narrative. But some of those other stuffs you just clip out. In my notes and sources, some of the stuff about the Bluegrass conspiracy and how it was operating, essentially, as a rogue intelligence unit for a rogue element of the US government. Had some pretty solid leads on how that worked. And people telling me that was based on government documents, but I didn't have access to those documents, and so couldn’t report it out, couldn’t write it down without getting sort of challenged and drummed out of town like people who make these sorts of allegations without having the exact heavy proof that you need for those kinds of allegations. So especially stuff around the Bluegrass conspiracy stuff, I just trimmed it down and made it easier to read by making it less complicated because there were definitely some things that I really wanted to write about but couldn’t nail down yesterday what motivated me to go to Brown University. My parents told me to apply to grad school. And so I did and Brown University offered me a full ride fellowship for a couple years and so despite the winters I stuck it out. Yes, sir. Okay, so that's very good question. So Johnny Boone's organization, the hierarchy what it was like this reference to mafia and cornbread, Mafia leads, leads you leads one to believe incorrectly, that there was sort of a strict hierarchy, like the Italian Mob or operated under, there was no real head boss, kappo and lieutenants and soldiers and a strict tight pyramid, like the Italian Mob was organized. It wasn't like that at all. Johnny operated a crew, that crew that gets busted in Minnesota was about 20 men, so significant. But Johnny was operating sort of independently of the dikkat brothers independently of Bobby Joe Shoemaker, independently of these other guys who had operations of a similar size and nature in various places. So they maybe wouldn't tell each other where they were growing that summer. But then when they came back, if someone had an order to fill and needed some pounds to make an order, sometimes these independent growers would cooperate with each other, and then other times, they would compete against each other. So it was more of a cornbread marketplace than it was a cornbread mafia. It was loosely organized based on family units for the most part, brothers and cousins and uncles. And then they would hire workers out because the unemployment rate in Marion County in 1980 was 20%. Yes, sir. So we’re talking about money now. So the question is about money, how much money? So that’s a tough one, right? Does anyone want to tell me how much money they made doing something they weren’t supposed to do? No. No one wants to tell me that. It’s hard enough getting out of the what I got out of them. Right. But like, like, but you’ll learn things along the way, like, learning how these guys learned to bury money because you bury money for too long. It gets brittle and mildewy and bankers can tell that it’s been buried and then they call it in. So you know, how do you bury a bunch of money without it going brittle? Or apparently what you do is you take a backhoe, you dig a big trench, and then you put some deep freezers down there. And then you fill your deep freezers with cash and then you duct tape that seal on and get a good and tight and then you throw it over with your backhoe and there you out. Or so I was told. But the only be that could get on this in a real sort of journalistic way. The only thing that the only thing I could find out factually about cash and how cash was a part of this business, is that the Federal Reserve had to alter its armor card delivery schedule to the banks and Lebanon to move the cash. Right, I know, right? Like, like, it’s a real thing. And there was a lot of cash. Yes, sir. How much of that will be related to what happened? With farmers? Sure. So the economy in the 80s. And why, how that was a motivating factor for a lot of these men who get involved in this thing. So
the tobacco economy by 1980 had essentially collapsed. And the automotive economy around the Toyota plant had yet to come in. So there was this period of time when the rural communities in Kentucky were basically out of work. I like I said before, it struck me during the research that the unemployment rate in Marin County was 20%. And a lot of these guys raised from these Hardy Catholic families were raised in a culture that you didn't take a check from the government if you didn't have to. And so that culture of being self reliant, pushed a lot of them into criminal activity instead of taking a check. So I think that had a lot to do with it for some of these men who who had, who had families and wanted to, you know, provide for their families, led more men into criminal activity regarding this marijuana stuff, and then definitely would have been otherwise, anytime you have large drug conspiracies, it always comes from economic deprivation. I'll tell you a quick story relative to that outside of Kentucky when I was doing this research in Savannah, because one of these court cases involving one of our guys was housed in the Savannah federal courthouse, because the principal co defendants for that case, were out of Savannah, it was a marijuana smuggling operation from the Colombian, the Caribbean coast of Colombia, in into St. Augustine. And then, from shrimp boats out of a place outside of Savannah called Thunderbolt, Georgia. And Thunderbolt Giorgio, if you've ever been in Savannah, is this little fishing community. And in the 80s, a lot of the shrimp boats started, or I guess in the 70s, the shrimp boats started going to Colombia to pick up marijuana and bring it back. And after looking through this court case, I went to the library started talking to one of the librarians in the Research Room about helping me find newspaper stories about this case and about stuff in the past relative to it about Thunderbolt GA, and that was run out of time as the end of the day and I deputized her I was like, Well, you look at some of this and like help me find stuff out and she was really excited and thrilled by the, you know, the notion and I was like what you're gonna find somehow in this is some kind of economic collapse. Before this stuff happens. She's like, Well, how do you know that and I was like, just trust me, you're gonna find something. And so a couple of days later, a week later, I get a I get a phone call from her and a bundle in the mail. She's like, how do you know? Because the shrimping industry in 1975 completely collapses. And President Carter puts a ban on shrimping in certain areas off the Georgia coast and all these men and Thunderbolt with Georgia have mortgages have loans out on these tripping boats and if they don't make money they're going to lose their boats. So they go off to Colombia and smuggle marijuana it's not like they decided to do it. It was a decision they were forced into and so I saw a lot of similarities with what was going on in Thunderbolt GA as what was going on in railway Kentucky. So a lot of people forced into criminal activity that didn't want to be there. Yes, sir. Is that correct? That's correct. Or was she actually your own business person? She was so are these 71 was a woman and she was on that Johnny Boone crew and Minnesota and that's about that's about all I want to say about that. Alright, I've been given the signal I got time for like, you know, one good question.

Question 59:44
Yes, ma'am. You You're employable. We had a neighbor who had a yard with a BB, a use case and a brake job. Because

James Higdon 1:00:02
I know that house yeah. Okay, I think one more Yes, sir. Very positive. What about? Sure. So how much? Where was the violence in this story and any story about outlaw stuff has violence in it? The prohibition of the plant requires violence. There's no civil court and cornbread land,
right? If somebody takes your thing you either you got to either you either it stays taken or you do something about it, right. And so, unfortunately, there's some law of the jungle stuff in here where people get hurt because of misunderstandings. And some of these guys drawn to this aren't just good natured Catholic guys with families. Some of them are hardboiled criminals who kill people. And I cover some of that in the book there's a guy named garland Russell who was clearly had some we'll call them issues who definitely killed some folks and so not all of this is as pretty as as I like to like put on it for the for the show. Some of it is quite for real and bad. So thank you for hate to ended on a downer but definitely, definitely worth bringing up and point out we're going to close on a downer, everybody. Thanks a lot.