Cousins

The 1953 Chevy slowly made its way along the two-lane road leading to town. The car was shaped like a large turtle. With its high ceiling and no seatbelts, I was able to stand up in the back seat and peer at the passing countryside through the car windows that always needed to be washed. The air was thick with coal dust from the tandem coal trucks that made their way from the many larger "union" mines as well as the small, non-union "truck" mines from across the county. All of the buildings, cars, and the people that we passed seemed to be covered with the same coal dust. As dusk approached, the last rays of sunshine struggled to pierce their way through the dust and smoke.

There wasn't a lot of flat land in Wise County. Most of the flat land ran along the rivers and creeks. The rivers and creeks shared the valleys with the few roads that ran through the area as well as the tracks for the railroads that carried the coal to distant ports and power plants. As we approached the City of Norton on the way to a rare night out, we started to pass by an area with holes that ran back into the hillside and brick archways that framed the front of these dark and foreboding openings. I soon began to notice an orange glow from the hillside as we made our way around a bend in the road.

Fire roared from these openings in colors of red, orange, and yellow, and black smoke belched from the archways. I could feel the heat on my face through the car window even though it was a cold day in December, and the temperature hovered near the freezing mark.

"Ooh, that's stinky!" I exclaimed as I wrinkled my nose in disgust at the acrid smell of sulfur that hung in the air.

These roaring fires were called “coke ovens.” A “coke oven” was basically a furnace where metallurgical coal was burned at high temperatures and a lack of oxygen to form “coke.” The “coke” itself fueled the furnaces used in the steel making process during the booming years following the end of World War II in far off places like Pittsburgh and Detroit.

“Is that hell?” I anxiously asked my Mom as we drove by the ovens.

“Yes, it is, Son.” Mom responded with an implied threat that I would end up there if I misbehaved.

I was three years old, and these coke ovens were one of my earliest, and scariest, memories of growing up in Wise County in Southwest Virginia. It was also one of those memories that I never forgot.

Growing up on the family farm, my neighbors all shared three attributes – they had large families, they were poor, and their last names were Collins, my mother’s maiden name. The land around our farm became known as Collins Mountain. Years later, when the county established 911 addresses, the road to the family farm was named Collins Mountain Road. My neighbors were related to either my Mom’s or Dad’s side of the family or, in a few cases, <u>both</u> Mom’s and Dad’s sides of the family!

Dad’s sister, Hazel, lived across from us with her husband, Olen Collins, and their five sons. Their property was in a relatively flat, swampy area that had a lot of copperheads and a pond for a swimming pool. We played baseball with a rubber ball and bat almost every day during the summer. Pitching was critical because retrieving home run balls was particularly hazardous because of the copperheads and the swamp.

Mom's first cousin, Vencil Collins, and his wife Mae lived next door to Hazel and Olen. Vencil had suffered a tragic accident as a young man when a large firecracker exploded and blew off his hand. His hand was buried in the Collins family cemetery near my Mom's childhood home. At the end of his life, he was buried next to his hand. One of their oldest daughters, Bama Jean, was the only cousin who suffered from a poisonous snake bite when she was bitten by a small copperhead near their home.

Mom's cousin, Hassell Collins, and his wife Ruth lived next door to us. They had eight children – five boys and three girls. My brothers, my sister, and I always seemed to be involved in a family feud with these cousins. Mom and Dad would often go food shopping after Dad got home from work in Friday evenings. During the summer, we would occupy ourselves with our Friday night rock fights with our next-door neighbors. We would collect "ammunition" all week, stake out our positions on the cliffs between our houses, and prepare for battle. The actual rock fights were ferocious, but short lived. They ended with the first casualty who was immediately removed to the "hospital" on our front porch for an ice pack. If blood was involved, the "patient" was asked to bite on a stick for the pain, and orange "mercurochrome" antiseptic was applied to the wound.

Mom's sister, Vonda, and her husband, Leonard Sturgill, and their several children lived in the "S curve" on US 23 heading toward Pound.

By one count, we had a total of seventy-six first cousins, and most of them lived near our family farm. Being a part of a large extended family growing in a sparsely populated rural area inevitably resulted in a lot of "cross marrying". Many years after the passing of my grandmother, Louise Collins, Mom's Dad, Jezreel, took the widow of his deceased brother, Elbert Collins, as his second wife. Her name was Etsy Collins, before and after the wedding.

These marriages resulted in some interesting "complications" in the extended family tree. My Mom and Olen Collins had the following familial relationships:

- Olen was Mom's brother-in-law (Olen married Dad's sister Hazel)
- Olen was Mom's step brother (Olen's Mom Etsy and Mom's Dad Jezreel married)
- Olen was Mom's first cousin (Olen's Dad Elbert and Mom's Dad Jezreel were brothers)

Dad's relationship with Leonard Sturgill was almost as interesting. Their familial relationships were:

- Leonard was Dad's Uncle (he was a brother to Dad's Mom Nannie)
- Leonard was Dad's brother-in-law (he married Mom's sister Vonda)

Having lots of cousins living close to us really came in handy when I was nine years old. It was a hot August Saturday afternoon. Mom and Dad had gone for their annual school clothes shopping trip to town. I was babysitting my sister, Kathy, age six, and my brothers Ricky and Dallas, age four and two, respectively. During the summer the boys often occupied themselves by capturing and trying to turn some native critters, like baby rabbits, squirrels, and turtles, into pets or catching snakes, bugs, and toads to frighten the heck out of our sister and female cousins.

My brother Ricky had been collecting brown and yellow turtles in the fields around our home in a wooden "dynamite box" that Dad had brought home from work in the coal mines. We had two small mixed breed dogs that would search the fields for turtles and alert Ricky with their incessant barking when they found one. He had collected several turtles in the box. I was sitting on the front porch when Ricky came around the house.

"The dogs are barking at a whole pile of turtles under the cherry tree," he exclaimed.

"OK, OK" I responded.

The cherry tree was located behind the outdoor toilet on the edge of the garden. I wasn't that interested in turtles. However, having been left in charge of my younger siblings, I felt that it was my duty to investigate the situation.

During August all of the weeds and ground cover started to take on colors of gold and brown. As I stared into the weeds under the cherry tree, I had a hard time making out the shape of what I was seeing.

"Ain't no turtles under that tree," I reassured my younger brother.

After my eyes adjusted to the shadows and streaks of sun under the tree, I could finally see the "turtle" that Ricky was ready to put in his dynamite box. It was not a turtle. It was in fact a coiled, diamond back mountain rattlesnake! It was coiled into a "pile" that was at least a foot high with its head swaying back and forth as it followed the loud barking and movement of our small dog.

I had killed copperheads before, but I knew my limitations. Luckily my cousin and next-door neighbor, Hassel Collins, was home.

"Help, it's a snake; it's a snake!" we all screamed.

He brought a rake, gave the snake a whack when it tried to crawl away, and killed it. It measured fifty-two inches long and about three inches in diameter. It had thirteen rattles; we kept them and the memory of this frightful day as souvenirs. We never killed another rattlesnake on our property, but we killed copperheads almost every summer. We considered poisonous snakes as one of the natural hazards of growing up on a mountain side farm.

My adventures were not restricted to the yard of our family farm. By the time I turned twelve, my first cousin Larry and I had officially become "mountain men." We would often pack up our pup tent, .22 caliber rifles, sleeping bags, and a few items of food and head off into the woods that ran for hundreds of acres around our homes. We would stay gone for days, subsisting on the few items of food that we brought and wild game like rabbits and squirrels that we shot along the way. We drank water from a natural spring that had the initials of our great grandfather, Berry C. Collins, carved in a rock adjacent to the spring. That rock was destroyed later in my life when the area around the ancestral home place was stripped to allow surface mining of the coal.

We often camped in an area of the county called "Glady Fork" because it had lots of water and wild game. On one particular night, I was awoken by some critter walking around outside our tent. We had made a campfire the night before by pushing over a few small, dead trees near our campsite. I looked outside the tent to determine what kind of critter was in the area. As I stared into the pitch-black night, I poked Larry with my elbow to wake him up to take a look.

"Larry, there are stars on the ground!" I announced as I looked on in awe at what I was seeing.

"Those are not stars" Larry reassured me.

The ground around our tent was sparkling like the stars in the moonless sky above our camp site! The roots of the small dead trees that we had used for firewood had an eerie green, luminescent glow caused by the fungus that had attacked the rotting wood.

"It's called fox fire" Larry explained.

The critter left the area, and I went back to sleep. We collected some of the fox fire the following morning to take home as a souvenir.

Technology during the early 1950's was pretty basic. We had a black rotary phone and a "party line" that served our home along with the homes of several of our neighbors. Each home had a distinctive ring that notified us that the call was for our home. We had an honor system that meant that we only were allowed to accept calls meant for our family. However, we did find that these party line phones, if you were very quiet, were a convenient way to keep up with the events in your neighbors' lives as well as neighborhood gossip. A typical call went something like this:

"Can you believe how Mrs. Johnson was dressed at the Piggly Wiggly Grocery Store last Saturday?" Hazel asked.

"Yea, with that tight, low cut dress, she left very little to the imagination! She looks like a "hussy"!" Ruth responded.

I quietly hung up the phone and went looking for Mrs. Johnson.

We were the first family on Collins Mountain to get TV – black and white TV in the mid 1950's followed by the "magic" of color TV a couple of years later. I will never forget our reaction when Bonanza, the first show that we saw on our new color TV, burst onto the screen.

"Wow, look at the colors!" we exclaimed.

The Friday night "professional" wrestling matches were the biggest neighborhood attraction. On a typical Friday night, our small TV room would be packed with uncles and cousins all pulling for their favorite wrestler and booing their least favorite villain. As the matches progressed, my uncles would contort themselves to mimic the positions of their favorite wrestler and offer frequent advice as they appeared to be in danger.

"Look out behind you!" Uncle Olen yelled.

"He's got a chair!" Cousin Larry warned, but it was too late.

We received three channels, NBC, ABC, and CBS, from the TV wire that ran up to the antenna in a tree on the top of the mountain behind our home. At least once a year during the summer, lightning seemed to strike the antenna, "fry" the wire, and result in us running new wire up to the antenna.

Another popular event was the annual molasses "stir off" that one of our neighbors up the "holler" had in the fall of the year. This day long event required two mules harnessed to the long poles of a grinder to walk slowly in a circle grinding sugar cane to produce raw sugar cane juice. The raw juice was then boiled over a wood fire for several hours in a large flat pan that that was roughly four feet wide by eight feet long until the sugar cane juice boiled down to become molasses. The molasses were poured off into jars, and all of the children were allowed to take pieces of sugar cane, chewed on the end to make it like a paint brush, to "sop out" the left-over molasses in the pan.

Work was a daily part of our lives. We had a lot of regular chores on the farm. These included hoeing the corn, potatoes, and beans in the garden, carrying water from the creek for washing clothes, cutting mining timbers, cutting and splitting firewood, making "dummies" for sale to the coal mines, and picking apples, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, and wild "possum" grapes for canning and making jelly.

The food that we and our extended family ate was scarce and very basic. Everyone had a garden, and most had a few apple trees. Some of the families received surplus US government food from a distribution warehouse in Norton. We all loved the large blocks of "government cheese" although our Dad was too proud to accept it.

"That government cheese is for poor people" he said. Dad never saw his family or himself as poor.

Our cousin Vencil had a connection to a store that gave away stale bread, cakes, and other baked goods with expired "sell by" dates. We, along with several of our cousins, feasted on honey buns, raisin cakes, and a number of baked treats. They tasted pretty good – if you tore off the parts with the blue mold.

From an early age, we were constantly looking for ways to make extra money. We did not receive an allowance, so we only had spending money if we earned it ourselves. My first job at age nine paid me ten cents per day to build a fire in the pot-bellied stove in the Riner School. I collected "pop bottles" that we returned to the Kilgore General Store to collect the three-cent deposit. My biggest opportunity to make money was during the summer when I would get up early and head up into the woods and the "strip jobs" near our home along with my dog Rusty to pick wild blackberries.

A strip job is the flat area that remained after bulldozers scraped away the side of the mountain to expose the seams of coal that were then mined or "augered" and sent to market. These strip jobs were prime habitats for large "shade" blackberries and copperheads. I had trained Rusty to go into the briar patches to sniff for snakes before I waded into the weeds to pick berries. I would leave home around 7-8 AM, pick two large buckets of berries, sell them to my regular customers for fifty cents per gallon, and be back home before noon with empty buckets, berry stained fingers, and two or three dollars in my pocket.

In the days when child labor laws were less common, we also picked beans on our neighbor's farm up at the head of Scott Roberson Hollow Road for fifty cents per bushel. On a typical day we would pick five bushels of "half runner" green beans, get a free lunch of green beans of course, and be home by supper time with a sun burn and three dollars for a full day's work.

Between battling rattlesnakes, working on the farm, and earning money wherever I could, I began school at the Pound Elementary School in town. By that time, many of my cousins had moved from Collins Mountain, and our lives followed a different path. It was my first ride on a school bus as I headed into the sixth grade. It had at least eight to ten rooms but no oiled floors or pot-bellied stoves. It had indoor plumbing. Sixth and seventh grade students attended the school.

My social life in school got off to an interesting start. It became clear that the students in the school were divided into two distinct social groups – the town kids, mostly children of college educated parents, and the rest of us. The first group lived in the one upscale area in town commonly called "the Pound Bottom"; I was in the second group. I was convinced that I had

reached the pinnacle of the social ladder in school one day that winter when I received an invitation to a twelfth birthday party for one of my classmates who lived in “the Bottom”.

I nervously prepared for my emergence into the social scene in town as the big day approached. On the day of the party, I put on my best clothes, brushed my teeth and used mouthwash, and slicked down my hair, including the “cow licks” with Brylcream from a tube in the medicine cabinet.

My Dad dropped me off early. I scanned the guests and saw a couple of the cutest girls in class. We talked and took turns playing 45 RPM records on a small portable stereo. The menu included club style sandwiches, birthday cake, and fruit punch. The entertainment for the party consisted primarily of an extended game of Spin the Bottle. For those not familiar with Spin the Bottle, the game required each participant in turn to spin a glass bottle on the floor, usually a green glass Coke bottle, and kiss the first member of the opposite sex on whom it stopped “square on the lips.”

“Kiss her, kiss her,” my buddies chanted when my turn came as they elbowed each other in the ribs and laughed hysterically.

I must have kissed all of the girls a dozen times, the first time that I had actually kissed a girl! I left the party with chapped lips, a cold that lasted a week, and memories that lasted a lifetime.

The 1960’s marked the end of the end of the tight knit community of cousins that I had experienced growing up in Wise County. My aunts, uncles, and cousins left Southwest Virginia as they pursued better job opportunities for their families far away from the poverty and diminished expectations of our lives on Collins Mountain.

They scattered to the State of Washington, Ohio, and Florida. I had cousins literally living from Seattle, WA, to West Palm Beach, FL. Today, my children mostly "talk" to their cousins through social media. They have first cousins whom they have never met.

My sister, Katherine, was recently discussing an upcoming weekend visit to our home for a family wedding with her grandson, Jacob. She was explaining how he would be staying with his seven-year-old cousin, Noah, whom he had never met.

He listened intently, but after a few minutes he turned to her and asked with the honesty that only comes from a four-year-old "Nana, what is a cousin?"

My generation became the last in my extended family to experience these closely-knit families. Like many of my cousins, I left Collins Mountain after high school to never return. I was able to dramatically improve the standard of living for my family vs. that of my parents, but that prosperity came with a price.