

Death of Appalachian Culture

I recently had an opportunity to do a presentation on memoir writing for a group of gifted students from a regional community college. These young people were the best of the best from our Appalachian Highlands region from Southwest Virginia. I looked forward with great anticipation for the date of the workshop to arrive. I prepared a handout on the writing process and selected a couple of excerpts from my book to read that I hoped would both allow them to benefit from my experience and maybe encourage them to write themselves.

My memoir featured my life story from my birth and childhood while growing up in Wise County, experience in the corporate world, and finally returning to Appalachia later in life. Appalachian culture is woven into all of the chapters of my book, even the ones involving world travel, corporate board rooms, and stock options. I had an idea for a fun ice breaker to start the presentation. Why not have the students take a “pop quiz” on Appalachian culture prior to the presentation to help them gain a greater appreciation for the story to follow?

The students entered the room, noisily chattering as they made their way to their seats and either turned off or placed their phones in “airplane mode” as instructed by their professor. My turn at the podium soon came, and I opened my Powerpoint presentation on the projector. I cleared my throat and launched into my slides.

“Good afternoon, students. I have been out of college for a while, but I know one of the most pressing questions for college students. Is this going to be on the test?”

You could hear a pin drop as the joke bombed, and the students looked on with expressionless faces. I moved on quickly to try to regain my momentum.

“Well, I thought I would take away that stress and give you a quiz to start my presentation. I have prepared a short quiz of twenty questions with ten questions on Appalachian slang words and ten questions on famous people who lived in Southwest Virginia.” The students’ reactions, to put it mildly, were less than enthusiastic.

“OK, I’ll start with slang words. Can anyone tell me what the word “haint” means?” Blank stares.

“A haint is a ghost or an apparition with the word derived from the word “haunt” that is a part of many Appalachian stories and tall tales.”

“Let’s try a little easier term. What is a “molasses stir off?”

A student in the front row timidly raised her hand to speak. At least I was finally getting a response.

“We have bought molasses in the local Food Country Grocery Store. My Dad loves to have molasses with buttermilk biscuits for breakfast. So, it obviously has something to do with making molasses, but I’m not sure where the “stir off” part fits into the process.”

“Thanks for answering the question, young lady. That’s a good answer, but I don’t hear how molasses making is a part of Appalachian culture,” I replied while trying to offer encouragement to the other students to share their thoughts.

“ A molasses stir off is an old Appalachian tradition for making molasses that involved horses or mules going in a circle to grind sorghum cane to produce juice and a day long process of boiling the juice over an open fire in a large metal pan. Children “sopped out” the pan at the end of the process using stalks of sorghum cane with the ends chewed like paintbrushes,” I offered as several of the students cringed with the classic “Ooh, that’s gross!” grimace on their faces. I plowed on bravely through the list of slang words with very few correct answers.

Trying to raise the energy level of the group, I bravely proposed “Let’s move on to famous people. You might find that topic more interesting. Who was George C. Scott?”

“Didn’t he write the *Star Spangled Banner*?” a perky blond student confidently asked from the back row.

“No, I think that was Francis Scott Key. Let me give you a hint. Maybe that will help. What if I said the word “Patton” is associated with his name?” I continued.

“Wasn’t he a famous general? Maybe in World War I or World War II?” another student chimed in.

“You’re really close. George Campbell Scott was born in Wise, Virginia in 1927. He went on to success as an actor in TV, the stage, and movies as well as a director and producer. He is widely known for his portrayal of General George S. Patton in the 1970 film *Patton* where he became the first actor to reject the Oscar for Best Actor from the Motion Picture Academy. He died in 1999 in California, and he was laid to rest in Wise.”

“Wow, that’s pretty neat,” the student commented, and several students nodded in agreement.

“Let’s try another one. Who was Francis Gary Powers?”

Blank stares returned to the students’ faces as they looked on.

“Let me offer another hint. Does the term “U-2” jog your memory?”

“You mean the Irish rock band? I just love Bono!” another student yelled from the back of the room with the most enthusiasm of the day so far.

Hiding a smile, I composed myself and finally responded. “No, he was not a member of a rock band. Francis Gary Powers lived the early part of his life in Pound, Virginia. After graduating from Milligan College, he enlisted in the U. S. Air Force and was later recruited by the CIA. He became world famous when he was shot down on May 1, 1960 as he piloted his U-2 spy plane in a top secret mission over the USSR. Convicted of espionage, he was held in prison in Moscow until he was exchanged for a Soviet spy on February 10, 1962 in a dramatic event that was the subject of the Tom Hanks’ film *Bridge of Spies*. Ironically, he was killed in 1977 when he crashed his traffic helicopter in Los Angeles, California.”

I moved on quickly to finish the “quiz” and get into my main topic. The results were disappointing, but not all that surprising. Overall, the students correctly answered only two or three questions out of each category of my informal “culture quiz.” I finished my presentation and departed the podium for the next speaker. The results of the quiz haunted me for weeks following the work shop. I had more questions than answers.

“Are young people getting any exposure to Appalachian culture in school or even at home? Is Appalachian culture no longer important to residents in the area? Are people embracing the culture or running away from it? Does anybody really care?” I kept asking myself.

I decided that I would not look to contemporary writing and movies for answers since many of them seem to constantly focus on demeaning people from Appalachia. Instead, I looked to the past and to stories from my early years, having been born and raised on a hardscrabble hill side farm in Wise County on Collins Mountain. These stories created a deep appreciation in my life for Appalachian culture that I have carried for the rest of my life.

Living Off the Land

“Danny, Danny, it’s time to get up! It’s after 6 AM, and the sun is already rising over the ridges off toward Kentucky. You need to start hoeing the corn before it gets so hot and the buck flies start biting.” Mom firmly stated as she shook me to awaken from a deep early summer sleep.

“Oh, Mom, it’s Saturday. Can’t I sleep a little longer? The corn can wait.”

“It can’t wait!” Mom replied with increasing urgency in her voice. “Now, get up, or you won’t be allowed to play baseball with your cousins this afternoon.”

I was twelve years old, and since I had not yet discovered girls, Mom knew my weakness. I put on my jeans with holes where the knees should be and my work shirt and came to the kitchen for breakfast before heading off to the fields.

Calling our home place a farm might have been somewhat of an exaggeration. Mom and Dad had bought the land right after World War II with a small down payment and making monthly payments to the land owner until the debt was paid, never missing a payment. Dad and my older brother had immediately gone to work to clear the land to create a house seat for the family home that Dad built with his own hands without a mortgage and to clear an area on the steep hillsides rising up behind the small ranch home for a garden and orchard. The cleared land comprised several acres that rose up at a steep angle from the yard toward the high, tree covered ridges that formed the outer perimeter of the farm.

Dad hired a neighbor with a mule and a hand plow to till the land in early spring and prepare it for the spring planting. Dad had a no nonsense attitude when it came to crops that he planted. He focused on ones that were easily preserved through canning or drying to sustain the family through the rest of the year or crops that could be sold from the back of his orange Jeep Wagonier on the side of US 23 just a short distance from the farm. His favorite crops were corn, potatoes, green beans, onions, and tomatoes. Exotic vegetables like zucchini, squash, and pumpkins were not allowed in the garden. There was a small plot near the back yard that was reserved for lettuce, grape tomatoes, and cucumbers for salads on hot summer days.

Today was corn hoeing day. I would always start at the bottom and hoe the corn rows from left to right and then back again as I worked my way from the bottom to the top of the field. The rows seemed to be a mile long as they stretched toward the holler on the north end of the farm. As the sun climbed above the ridges, and the temperature and humidity slowly rose, it wasn't long before I was sweating profusely with visions of the cool, swimming hole on my aunt's farm across from our farm running through my imagination to pass the time. My condition wasn't made any better by the pollen coming off the corn stalks and the constant itching that increased as the morning moved toward lunch time. I was jolted from my daydreams by a call from my Mom to come to lunch – a call that could not have come soon enough!

I had lunch, returned to the fields, and finished the hoeing of the corn my mid afternoon. After I cleaned up to get rid of the "itchiness" from the corn and the "rolls" of sweat and topsoil from the day's work, Mom asked me if I wanted to go looking for my cousins to play a few innings of baseball before supper.

"No, Mom, I'm pretty exhausted. Maybe I will just rest and watch Lone Ranger or Roy Rogers."

This ritual of hoeing the crops was repeated throughout the spring and summer. Dad didn't take kindly to weeds in the garden, and my brothers, sister, and I worked hard to make sure the weeds died a quick death in the hot, summer sun. It seemed like only a short time had passed until our attention turned to harvesting the crops and preparing them for canning or sale. The most lucrative cash crops were beans and potatoes that Dad sold by the bushel on the road side or to local markets. Everything else was preserved for later consumption by the family.

Not everything on the farm required hoeing. Dad ordered fifty apple tree sprouts from the farm store and planted them in rows, twenty feet apart, to start an apple orchard. The trees were a mix of winesap, staymans, horse apples, and other varieties. They took about ten years to start bearing fruit. After that they provided a vast supply of apples for sale and for making applesauce and prized apple butter. Dad worked on the orchards for the rest of his life.

Pears, peaches, and strawberries were not grown on the farm. However, we had a tradition of making a trip over to the town of Dungannon in Scott County to buy pears from a farmer whom we knew. Someone from the county would always make a trip to Georgia to get a load of peaches near the end of the summer, and we looked forward to the sweet taste of this rare delicacy. One of our neighbors had a large strawberry patch. We also had a tradition of slipping into the strawberry patch, crawling on our stomachs like commandoes to avoid detection, to collect some of the largest and most juicy berries. After a busy afternoon in the strawberry patch, Mom was often confused as to why we had little appetite for supper and our fingers seemed to have a permanent red stain.

It was not just about vegetables and fruits on the farm. We never owned a cow, but we did share ownership of one with my aunt and uncle. We always said that we owned “half a cow.” The cow provided large quantities of milk, carried from the adjoining farm in a metal bucket, and often served while still warm from the udder. We also practiced the ancient Appalachian ritual of butchering a hog after the first frost. The hog was quickly dispatched with a 22-caliber bullet, and it was hung from a limb on a tree in the back yard for processing, resulting in a large supply of pork chops, pork roasts, and sausage.

We did raise a few chickens on the farm. Sundays were the most dreaded day of the week for the chickens. Mom’s chicken ‘n dumplings was our favorite Sunday dinner. It was cooked in a pressure canner on the kitchen stove. The pressure gauge would rotate wildly as it spit steam, creating a constant fear of dying young for my siblings and me if this ominous device ever exploded! Unfortunately one unlucky resident from the chicken coop became the “main feature” at dinner as the chicken’s head was quickly severed by use of a hatchet on an oak stump in the back yard. Shockingly, many of the chickens would run around the back yard after their heads had been severed in a futile attempt to escape. I came to understand where the common Appalachian cliché “running around like a chicken with its head cut off” had its origin!

Foraging in the Mountains

This annual cycle of growing and harvesting wasn’t limited to “domestic” vegetables, fruits, and farm animals. The hills south of the farm had been scarred by unregulated mining companies in their pursuit of coal when they bulldozed long paths into the hillside and augered the coal from the coal seams. In the days before mine reclamation laws went into effect, they simply abandoned the land after the coal had been mined out.

These wide swaths of land became fertile growing areas for wild blackberries that hung in clumps in the bright late summer sun. I would often venture alone into the mountains to pick blackberries with my trusted dog Rusty along to help protect me from the copperhead snakes. I would leave early in the morning, fill two buckets with five gallons of berries, and sell the berries for fifty cents a gallon to neighbors before returning home. At other times, we would pick blackberries for canning or making some of Mom's popular blackberry jam for breakfast.

On other trips into the mountains, we would find growths of wild grapes that we called "possum grapes" on long vines that grew up into the trees. We would harvest these grapes at their peak of ripeness and carry them home in a large metal washtub for Mom to make grape jelly. On rare occasions, we would find patches of wild raspberries or "huckleberries" that were even more prized because of their rarity. In later summer we made at least one trip up to High Knob to pick blueberries that grew on tall bushes.

Preserving the Harvest

With such a variety of vegetable and fruits available, Mom took on a major role in preparing and preserving the harvest. We didn't have a basement, so one common way to preserve potatoes for the winter was to dig a pit in the side of the hill, place potatoes covered with straw in the pit, and cover them with dirt to prevent the potatoes from freezing over the long winter.

Drying food was also common. Mom would "string" half runner green beans and wash them to remove the effects of insect spray. Then she would enlist my brothers, sister, and me in the time consuming ritual of impaling the beans with a large needle onto a piece of cotton string and hanging them off nails on the front porch until they had dried out to the right level of moisture that only she would know. These "shuky beans" as they were commonly called were then stored for the winter. Apple slices were also dried for storage.

Home canning was the most common form of food preservation. A wide variety of vegetables and fruits were washed, peeled, and prepared for canning in wide-mouthed Mason jars. Large quantities of up to thirty jars of green beans were placed in a galvanized wash tub with rags between the jars. They were brought to a boil and then simmered over a wood fire for up to eight hours. After the jars had cooked for the right amount of time, they were removed and placed on the kitchen counter until they "sealed." We knew that the jars had sealed when we heard the familiar "popping" sound. Mom spent much of her life perfecting the canning process. She won awards at the Wise County Fair in August each year for her skills. We kept a collection of several of her prize winning entries, complete with the blue ribbons, at the family farm for years after she had passed away.

Some traditional Appalachian methods of food preservation became community events that drew parents and children from miles around. One of the most popular events of the year was the annual molasses stir off. A pair of mules would dutifully plod along in a circle on a journey to nowhere at the end of long poles attached to a sorghum cane grinder. The sorghum cane would be fed for the entire day into the grinder to produce juice. This juice was boiled for several hours over an open fire until the molasses reached the right, dark brown color and consistency. The precious product of a long day's work was carefully poured off into jars. The children, including my siblings and several of my cousins, were then invited to "sop out" the large molasses pan with stalks of sorghum cane.

Annual apple butter making events were even more popular. Apples were washed, peeled, and cut into slices to start the process. The apples, sugar, and cinnamon were then cooked for hours over an open fire until the apple butter was just right. My grandfather made apple butter in a large copper kettle that we still have on the family farm. The products of this effort were many jars of delicious apple butter to be served with churned butter and hot, hand made buttermilk biscuits for months until the seasonal harvest rolled around, and this timeless cycle was repeated.

Future of Appalachian Culture

The formative years of my life were steeped in these and many other examples of Appalachian culture that formed my personal value system for my adult life. I learned to value the benefits of hard work, integrity, and the importance of family. Many changes in society have led to the diminishing of this culture. In my experience, the wide scattering of members of our extended family in pursuit of a better life for their families has exacerbated this process. My daughter and her family live in upstate New York in a world far removed from my upbringing in Appalachia. When he was a curious five-year old, my oldest grandson who is quite fond of bacon, asked his Mom

"How is bacon made?"

"Son, bacon comes from pigs," she casually replied.

"How do pigs make the bacon?" he persisted.

"The pigs *are* the bacon," she responded as his eyes grew wide with shock.

I believe that the "green shoots" of traditional Appalachian culture are still alive in the region. The responsibility to value and preserve the Appalachian culture has been passed to the next generations. If they are not successful, the decline will only accelerate until Appalachian culture joins other elements of society on the scrap heap of history. It will truly be a profound tragedy if that happens.