LOOKING BACK IN TIME---STARING INTO HISTORY
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
TEACHER FROM APPALACHIA

by

Luther R. Kirk

Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Curriculum and Instruction

APPROVED:

[Signatures]

Dr. Rosary V. Lalik, Chairperson

Dr. Jerome A. Niles

Dr. James W. Garrison

Dr. Susan B. Murphy

Dr. Grace T. Edwards

September, 1996

Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Autobiographical, Elementary, Teacher, School, Appalachia
LOOKING BACK IN TIME---STARING INTO HISTORY
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
TEACHER FROM APPALACHIA

by

Luther R. Kirk

Committee Chairperson: Dr. Rosary V. Lalik
Curriculum and Instruction

(ABSTRACT)

Filled with both painful and joyful memories, curious turning point mo-
ments, strange epiphanies, and numerous significant others, this autobiographical
sketch is the story of an oppressed young man from Appalachia who shunned his
roots searching for answers. Ethnographically, it is the study and story of a dis-
advantaged student who struggled with learning only to teach himself to read and
write and, in doing so, found himself caught between two divergent worlds, one of
inherited Appalachian values, the other of earned middle class status. It is the
personal narrative of an elementary school teacher and administrator who time
after time attempted to escape an oppressive pedagogy only to be sucked help-
lessly back in at each new experience. And, it is the anecdote of an individual
who eventually returned to his roots, his history, his culture, sensing more dis-
inctly that when perplexed one must always try to discover where his or her soul
lies and then go from there. The answers lie within us; they are part of who we
are as individuals; for, they have been shaped by our "life history" (Goodson,
1992, p. 6) inside of which is hidden our "life story" (Goodson, 1992, p. 6).
Dedicated to:

my wife, Katy
my son, Andrew
my daughter, Maggie
my mother, Ella Mae.

They are the most significant others in my life.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my committee members:

Rosary Lalik who entered my life once upon a time and agreed to be my teacher and mentor, and who made me research, write, rewrite, read, and reread, continuing to have faith in me, and patience with me, as I floundered about in unfamiliar territory.

Susie Murphy, who almost mystically, it seemed, entered my classroom several years ago and for some reason respected me as a teacher, giving me the encouragement and confidence I needed as a struggling learner---and did not give up on me over the years.

Jim Garrison who helped me to more fully understand the importance of my own personal folk psychology and the significance of telling my story verisimilarly.

Jerry Niles who joined my list of significant others a long while back as I labored in the classroom as a teacher and who, over the years, never forgot me.

Grace Edwards, who, for some reason, decided to assist a fellow Appala-chian, and who, by example, showed me that being Appalachian is something to be proud of and not something to run away from.

To you all, I humbly say, "Thanks."
# Table of Contents

Title Page i

Abstract ii

Dedication iii

Acknowledgments iv

Table of Contents v

Table of Figures viii

Introduction—Wrestling With an Oppressive Pedagogy 1

Chapter 1  Family---Struggling to Survive 14
  Mom 14
  Dad 29
  Brothers and Sisters 33

Chapter 2  A Place Called Appalachia---A Place Called Home 57
  My Personal Appalachian Space 58
    The Farm 63
    Home 67

Chapter 3  A Place of Natural Beauty 74
  The Seasons 76
    Spring 76
      Gardening 78
    Summer 81
    Autumn 83
      Apple Butter 88
      Stone Walls 89
      Hog Killing 90
    Winter 92
      Christmas 94

Chapter 4  Religion 103
  Revivals 104
  Baptisms 105
  Home Comings 108

Chapter 5  Play 111
Chapter 6  Changes
             Leaving Home

Chapter 7  On My Own for the First Time---Public Schooling
             Teas Elementary School
             1951-1957 - Teas Elementary School -
             The Early Years
             Achieving School Failure
             Life at Teas Elementary School
             Life at Home
             1957-1960 - Sugar Grove School -
             The Middle Years
             1960-1965 - Sugar Grove School -
             The High School Years

Chapter 8  Beyond the Ridges
            United States Coast Guard Training Center,
            Cape May, New Jersey

Chapter 9  Surrounded by Strangers

Chapter 10 Caught Between Two Worlds

Chapter 11 College---Entering the Impossible Dream

Chapter 12 Home to the Mountains

Chapter 13 Beginning Anew

Chapter 14 To Become a Teacher
            New Strategies in Teaching
            Teacher as Researcher

Chapter 15 Advanced Studies
            Return to the Classroom

Chapter 16 Engaging in a Difficult Task---Administration
            Principal

Chapter 17 Conclusion---Methods and Comments
            Theoretical Frameworks
            Questions of Inquiry
            Data Collection
            Data Analysis

vi
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource List</th>
<th>360</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>The Kirk farm and house with Barton Mountain in the background</td>
<td>13a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Ella Mae (Dye) Kirk, born May 19, 1903</td>
<td>28a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Worley Lewis Kirk, born June 9, 1892; died June 3, 1951</td>
<td>33a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Val, born March 19, 1927; died March 28, 1994</td>
<td>52a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Luther Kirk (Luke) (back), born March 15, 1945 George Kirk (Red) (front), born May 5, 1946</td>
<td>56a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Head of Hogtrough Hollow (map)</td>
<td>58a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>The Kirk Farm (map)</td>
<td>63a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Looking from the front porch of the Kirk house with Iron Mountain in the background</td>
<td>64a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>The Kirk home---Ella Mae (Mom) still lived in the house when this picture was made</td>
<td>73a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>(left to right) George (Red), Jimmy (Jim), Luther (Luke)</td>
<td>112a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>Mt. Roger's and the Interstate System (map)</td>
<td>118a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12</td>
<td>Teas Community and School (map)</td>
<td>132a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13</td>
<td>Teas Elementary School after it closed</td>
<td>136a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14</td>
<td>Luther Kirk - third grade</td>
<td>148a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 15</td>
<td>Luther Kirk - U. S. Coast Guard</td>
<td>197a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 16</td>
<td>A drawing from art class</td>
<td>227a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 17</td>
<td>Newlyweds---Katy and Luke, May 27, 1978</td>
<td>252a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 18</td>
<td>Andrew Kirk (back), Maggie Kirk (front)</td>
<td>261a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 19</td>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>303a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction---Wrestling With an Oppressive Pedagogy

Filled with both painful and joyful memories, curious turning point moments, strange epiphanies, and numerous significant others, this autobiographical sketch is the story of an oppressed young man from Appalachia who shunned his roots searching for answers. Ethnographically, it is the study of a disadvantaged student who struggled with learning only to teach himself to read and write and, in doing so, found himself caught between two divergent worlds, one of inherited Appalachian values, the other of earned middle class status. It is the personal narrative of an elementary school teacher and administrator who time after time attempted to escape an oppressive pedagogy only to be sucked helplessly back in at each new experience. And, it is the anecdote of an individual who eventually returned to his roots, his history, his culture, sensing more distinctly that when perplexed one must always try to discover where his or her soul lies and then go from there. The answers lie within us; they are part of who we are as individuals; for, they have been shaped by our "life history" (Goodson, 1992, p. 6) inside of which is hidden our "life story" (Goodson, 1992, p. 6).

As an Appalachian, my life history and story serve as an active, working model for the assertions Paulo Freire (1994) makes in his book Pedagogy of the Oppressed. He writes that "dehumanization . . . is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human" (p. 26) and "sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so" (p. 26). However, my feelings of inadequacy did not begin in the steamy rain forests of Brazil where Freire labored to help impoverished peasants liberate themselves from their oppressors. Instead, my growing insecurities began many years ago hidden within
the thick woods, sloping hillsides, cleared fields, dark hollows, and high ridges of an isolated Appalachian mountain plateau.

In the distorted view I held of myself as an oppressed Appalachian dwelling in Southwest Virginia and disconnected from the outside world, my vocation of becoming more fully human involved liberating myself from those whom I thought to be my oppressors---rural Appalachians as well as strangers living outside the area. I even attempted to join the foreigners, something Freire (1994) in his wisdom warns against. He asserts that encumbered individuals must not, in seeking to regain their humanity, which is a way to create it, become in turn oppressors of the oppressed. Rather, they should strive to become restorers of the humanity of both.

My false pride and crippled view of myself as a vexed Appalachian hinged on the snobbish, mistaken belief that if I left Appalachia, became educated and traveled, I could somehow find answers to the penetrating question "Who am I?" and thus change the negative image I held of myself, while at the same time freeing myself body and soul from my oppressors and my oppression. For, having grown to view myself as a dumb, unsophisticated, ignorant hillbilly, I yearned to become someone more cultured, educated, and more cosmopolitan. As a result of such shallow thinking and in desperation, I fled Appalachia, planning never to return. I traveled. I went to college.

Psychologically, socially, and economically my flimsy theory came true. But, emotionally it lacked substance, for my many encounters with various individuals from beyond the mountains constantly reminded me of my Appalachian roots and humble beginnings. Often, such people intentionally, and unintentionally, ridiculed me and my ancestors, a group of oppressed people suffering be-
cause of dehumanization, their humanity stolen by bullies from outside the region. Such outsiders, for a variety of reasons---negative views of Appalachia, its isolation from the outside world, the perceived lack of education of its inhabitants, the lower socio-economic status of the people who lived there, the economic interests of powerful groups outside the area, and the far-fetched notion that cultural awareness for the Appalachian people appeared lacking, and to some, nonexistent---too often sent the troubling message that Appalachians appeared less than human.

But, after much shame, guilt, reflection, soul searching, and education, I started to realize that "dehumanization . . . is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order" (Freire, 1994, p. 26). Consequently, with increasing awareness of the strength and beauty of my Appalachian space (Lanier, 1991), and with maturity, I began viewing my past more positively and wrote the following autobiographical sketch about growing up in the mountains.

Misplaced Daydreams
Faraway Places Lead Back Home

When one of my sisters married, she moved to a place called Lone Star, a crossroads on old Route 11, the main road to Marion, Virginia. The small community of Lone Star chanced to be just about ten miles from where I grew up.

This particular sister came for Sunday dinner each week and often took one of the younger siblings home with her. Many times during the summer I would go and spent a few days or perhaps even a week. During those visits, I remember walking to the railroad tracks near her house and watching the passenger trains as
they flashed by like silver snakes. Coming from and going to places I thought I would never be able to visit. I could only imagine such exotic spots in my mind because someone, probably my older sister who had moved to Baltimore, often spoke of them.

Such foreign places seemed strange, intriguing, exciting and intimidating to me. I imagined tall buildings, ribbons of concrete, stores that stayed lit up all night, flashing neon signs, and people by the score moving to and fro. I often found myself sitting on a knoll overlooking the railroad tracks waiting, watching, and listening for a train while such vivid thoughts trampled through my head.

I remember the first faint sounds of the rumbling machine as it slid along the tracks somewhere far off. Suddenly, a lonesome squall pierced the stillness and streamlined, long, and sleek, the speeding train eased around the bend and streaked past me, one silvery flash after another. Cars swaying, wheels jangling, metal rolling against metal, it left just as quickly as it arrived, disappearing around the next curve. Far off, the rushing train’s long, low wail lingered, dying in the distance as it raced on. Gradually, my grassy knoll above the tracks returned to the shushed, quiet, gentle silence of crickets chirping, and grasses, nudged by gentle breezes, whispering to each other.

As the charging train flashed past, I remember seeing people in the swaying dining cars. Smoking, eating and drinking, they sat at tables covered with white linen table cloths. Others reclined in the Pullmans. I waved to them; they waved back. And, as I sat on
that grassy knoll barefoot, and wearing my bibbed "overhalls," I imagined where the people on that train might be going to and where they must have come from. I thought: What kind of lives did they lead? Were they rich? Famous? That woman, peering out at me with her long cigarette, looking so elegant and fine, who did she happen to be? What might her name be? And, that well-dressed gentleman talking to her as they sped past, what about him? What a glamorous, sophisticated, bedazzling world they must be going to in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore or Washington, D. C. I thought it must have been wonderful to have boarded that train in the smoky, misty morning of some distant Deep South city such as New Orleans, Memphis, Nashville or Chattanooga. The names themselves held a certain mystery and fascination for me.

Sadly, progress often exerts a mighty price. The grassy knoll above the railroad tracks where I once daydreamed is gone, replaced by a steel and concrete bridge. Much of the hill has been paved over for a parking lot. A junky, overcrowded convenience store sits nearby. Styrofoam cups, candy wrappers, plastic bottles, and other debris litter the area. And, passenger trains don't glide over the railroad tracks anymore. Only an occasional freight train rumbles past. Parallel to the railroad tracks, a man-made trench, bulldozed out for Interstate 81, provides a straight bed where cars and trucks shuttle back and forth like speeding bullets.

To be sure, sitting by the railroad tracks so many years ago, watching and wondering about all those strangers whizzing past
and fantasizing about all those far off exotic places, instilled in me a desire to search for a better, more sophisticated life than I thought I had in the mountains, hills, and hollows of Smyth County, Virginia. Consequently, I grew ashamed of my roots. I wanted to forget them and search for something I thought more glamorous. I wanted to flee the Kirk farm, lying on the side of Barton Mountain where, across the valley, Iron Mountain reared up like a giant. The old house, my home, with its sagging front porch, crooked wooden steps, tar-papered walls and rusting tin roof became an embarrassment to me.

So, after high school, I joined the military, left the mountains, and never wanted to return. Indeed, my travels took me far away from Southwest Virginia. I visited many of the cities I fantasized about while sitting on the grassy knoll overlooking the railroad tracks so many years before. They proved to be exciting and entertaining for a while.

Gradually, however, I made the slow trip back home. As I grew older and had children of my own, I realized I didn't want to lose my rich mountain heritage. Filled with joyful, as well as painful memories, I began to appreciate the fact that my early experiences in Appalachia had molded and shaped me. I more fully understand those experiences now and as a result will never abandon my past again. I can't. For it is certain, I grew up in a shanty at the head of Hogtrough Hollow in the mountains of far Southwest Virginia. That simple fact remains, no matter how sophisticated I think I am, how
far I travel, or how educated I become. I can't change it and don't want to anymore.

Certainly, the ancient mountains of my youth have changed some over the years. Broad-shouldered Iron Mountain still looms in the distance. But the gray barns, herds of cattle, yellow stubble fields, lush green meadows, whispering rows of tall corn, and flat, broad-leafed tobacco plants, once living and dying in its shadow, are gone, replaced by houses and mobile homes.

Today, the Kirk farm yet lies on the side of Barton Mountain. But, it has been forsaken and the trees arching around it have slowly and quietly marched from the edge of the dark woods, where they stood like silent, responsible sentinels for so long. Spreading quietly across the once open, fertile fields, they have conquered them all, one by one (see Figure 1, p. 13a).

In short, even with the changes, the mountains of Southwest Virginia seem far more exciting, and safer, than any of those far-off, exotic places I once visited. For, with the passage of time, I became quite aware of the uniqueness surrounding them, as well as the farm where I grew up. The simple life I led there, sheltered by my family and friends, helped fashion me, giving me the character I have today. Now, I want others to know that I am proud of who I am because of such early surroundings.

On a whim I sent the article to The Roanoke Times, a local newspaper. Much to my surprise they published it along with a picture of my old home. It ran in the Monday's edition, May 23, 1994.
Pleased with my first publication, the response it generated amazed me. This simple autobiographical sketch dealing with my early life in Smyth County, Virginia, my longing to leave Appalachia, and my return in mind, body and spirit to the place of my ancestors spoke volumes to the hearts and minds of the many people who read it. Perhaps it allowed them to return to another place and time, for I exposed a simple truth allowing sympathetic introspection to take over. For me, writing the story proved both "cathartic and liberating" (Noddings and Witherell, 1991, p. 280) but, more importantly, such communication made me realize that if this simple act of verisimilitude, written from the heart by a common Appalachian, could affect so many people in such diverse ways, then the ramifications for autobiographical writing seemed immense.

I received many phone calls and numerous congratulations in person and by mail. Teachers, colleagues, family members, friends, complete strangers, and long forgotten acquaintances contacted me. All said they had been moved by my personal story. Some related how they were stirred to tears. The pathetic image of a small boy, dirty blond, shaggy hair, barefoot, and wearing faded blue and patched bibbed overalls, sitting by the railroad tracks waiting, watching, and listening for a train painted an image much too real for them. Apparently, many had experienced that same illusion in their own way, for they too had dared to dream.

Remembrances of things past and the contrast of old and new popped up several times in conversations about the article. Some said, especially older folks, that my story reminded them of an Appalachia once clean and bright as opposed to one where broken glass, tin cans, plastic bags, and Styrofoam cups, along with other junk now lay, haphazardly tossed along the roadsides, or pitched intentionally and indiscriminately over the sides of steep mountains.
Others identified with the train image running through the piece. One of my old neighbors from Salem, Virginia, recalled: *I was so surprised and pleased when I saw your name and then read your interesting article. It brought back memories for me too. I watched the trains go by (in the country) too.*

Another wrote: *I read with interest your article . . . because I too was born and lived for several years on a small farm in Ashe County (Jefferson-West Jefferson, N. C.). This writer sent me a free copy of his "little railroad book," as he called it: *Along the Norfolk and Western: Olden Days and New Ways: People, Places, Events* by Tam Park Vannoy.

Some appreciated the writing style. *I loved your essay, one person wrote. It was not only poignant but beautifully written.* A teacher from Hidden Valley Junior High School noted: *You write so poetically! I used your . . . article . . . for examples of personification and alliteration with my English classes.*

This same English teacher continued:

*I also shared with them the emphasis on roots and how important they are. Thank you for such an honest, straight-forward statement about the stuff of which character is made. Would that more of today's youth could understand the virtue of rural origins. Perhaps in time they will appreciate it as some of the rest of us do!*

A gentleman by the name of Webb E. Kirk who had begun a genealogical tree of the Kirk family, sent me a copy. In fascination, I read the pages of *The Descendants of Ptolemy Kirk and Emily Nickels* and learned that my great, great, great grandfather, Henry Kirk, came to Appalachia around 1792 via Pennsylvania from Germany. My great, great grandfather, Jacob Kirk, fought in the War of 1812. Ptolemy Kirk, my great grandfather, served as a Confederate sol-
dier in the Civil War. Since childhood I've marveled over his Confederate Southern Army tombstone in the Kirk cemetery lying high atop a lonely windswept hill deep in the Appalachia mountains. My grandfather, Rush Kirk, my father, Worley Kirk, and other family members are buried there too.

One letter came from Martinsville, Virginia. This correspondence, perhaps the most poignant of all, read:

Dear Luther:

Amen!

This could have been my story as well as probably many others who lived around there. I went to school with your sisters. I believe June was close to my age. We lived in the forks of the road across from West Cemetery. I remember you and your brother, who was about your age. As I recall you were the quiet one.

I graduated from Sugar Grove High School in June of 59, having just turned 17 years old in May of that year. I joined the Army and left the next day.

You may remember me or some of my family. I was called "Jack" Privitt at the time.

I enjoyed your story far beyond my ability to express it in words.

Very sincerely,

Ralph J. Privitt

I vaguely remembered Jack. His house sat in the forks of the road, about a mile below ours. We walked there to help my mother carry groceries home. She rode the work bus to town and back about once a month. While we waited
for the bus to arrive, we played such games as tag, "Annie, Over," "Red Rover," and "Bum, Bum, Bum" with his sisters and brothers.

I know many people from Appalachia who "left the next day" for a variety of reasons. Most left to find work but some left, like me, because they grew ashamed of their roots or, as James Gee (1990) might say, they did not feel "indebted to the social group to which they had been apprenticed" (p. XI). Time after time my sisters, brothers, relatives, and friends boarded trains and buses, or piled into cars headed north, out of Appalachia.

As the narrator, this short autobiographical sketch allowed me to find my voice as an oppressed Appalachian. It assisted me in decontextualizing (Goodson, 1992) my life by helping me to explore through reflection where I've been, thus leaving me with a better understanding of who I am. As Freire (1994) assures us: "To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (p. 29). In fighting oppression, simply coming to understand that, in the final analysis, we are who we are no matter how far we travel, how educated we become, or how sophisticated we think we are, is a humbling revelation in our struggle to find inner peace. For, in short, fighting oppression involves trying to understand ourselves better. To understand ourselves better, it seems wise to look at our own life histories for they are like books, filled with telling stories. But:

stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside stories and stories between stories and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding
is the getting lost. If you're lost, you really start to look around and
to listen. (Metzger, 1979, p. 104)

Thus, with such a frame of reference, I begin the story of my life, one
which began over fifty years ago when I joined an already large family struggling
to survive amid the impoverishment surrounding them, hidden deep within the
isolated mountains of far Southwest Virginia—-a place called Appalachia, a place
called home---the head of Hogtrough Hollow. In this place of natural beauty the
seasons controlled our very lives, religion kept our poor lost souls in check, and
play made life there all worthwhile. But, therewith, the changes came, at first
creeping and crawling in, and then tumbling and rolling quick and fast, hurriedly
altering an ancient way of life forever.

On my own for the first time, public schooling offered a disturbing chal-
lenge, but one which also became my personal quest for inner understanding and
peace. Enticed by the outside world and yet afraid to go, my forced travels be-
Yond the ridges, to far flung regions, found me lost and struggling, surrounded by
strangers in the city of Boston who neither understood nor cared about my Appa-
lachian pride or roots. Sadly, because of such troubling encounters, I found my-
self caught between two worlds and decided to abandon my past only to find such
an endeavor impossible for my soul still wandered amid the mountains of Appala-
chia, their ridges standing stalwart like the rounded swells of a sea green ocean
frozen in time.

Finally, I entered college, a long sought after, though seemingly impossible
and elusive dream and afterwards returned home to the mountains. However, I
found that I had changed and the homecoming "became more anguished than
pleasant" (Byer, 1991, p. 178). Consequently I had to begin anew for I had quite
possibly allowed my education to become an excuse for failure. Therefore, wishing to become a teacher I eventually did so but only through much hard work and personal commitment. Over the years, I evolved and changed in my role as elementary school teacher. Still, after some time, I left the classroom altogether for advanced studies and work in administration, as an assistant principal and principal. The work proved to be a challenging, engaging, and difficult task. Yet, pitted against the harsh desires of a school administration bent on "technocratic ideology" (Wirth, 1983, p. 107), my own need to create a "basic school" (Boyer, 1995, p. 3), and my latent desires to return to graduate studies, the experience ended in disappointment and heartbreak. Now, I am returning once again, not only to my roots in Appalachia but to my ties in the classroom, as a teacher.
Figure 1 - The Kirk farm and house with Barton Mountain in the background
Chapter 1

Family---Struggling to Survive

Stereotypically, I come from a large Appalachian family. Not counting two step-brothers on my father's side, my mother and father produced twelve children. One of those children died in infancy. Furthermore, they welcomed into their home a grandson who lived with us until he started school. Then he traveled back and forth from Baltimore each spring and fall until he entered the military after graduating from high school. Mom took care of us all---especially after Dad died (see Figure 2, p. 28a).

Mom

Feebly rising, Mom creeps ever so slowly. Resting on the edge of her bed for a bit, she dawdles for a while before continuing on to her wheelchair standing throne-like before her. These are her morning and evening rituals. For most of the day, she sits, gray head bent, lips moving, whispering as though in prayer, saying things that make no sense, her mind rambles in and out of life.

"Virginia," she calls, "what was the name of that president I was tryin' to remember yesterday?"

"Calvin Coolidge."

"Who?"

"Calvin Coolidge."

"Who?"

"Cal-vin Cool-idge," Virginia emphasizes loudly, enunciating the words.

"Who?"

"Calvin Coolidge, Mom, Calvin Coolidge."

"Calvin Coolidge?" "Oh, that's right, Calvin Coolidge."
Born May 19, 1903, Ella Mae Dye lived for most of her young years in an isolated mountain cabin on the banks of Little Tumbling Creek. The stream falls and tumbles through a deep gorge, simply referred to as the Cove locally. Hidden in the mountains of far Southwest Virginia, the Cove, a good thirty miles from the nearest town of Saltville, comprised Mom's piece of "Appalachian space" (Lanier, 1991, p. 8) for a long time.

"I learned how to cook on a open fireplace," she used to tell us. "My momma, your grandma, she taught me how to make corn pone when I was so little she had to set the pan on a chair so I could stir the batter."

"Virginia, what was the name of that little hardware store on Main Street in Marion?"

"True Value."

"What?" She turns her head sideways listening, trying to understand.

"True Value."

"Oh, True Value, that's right, now I remember."

On August 11, 1920, at the age of seventeen, Mom married a logging man, a widower. He had two sons of his own; they needed a mother. She moved from Little Tumbling Creek across the ridge to Big Tumbling Creek. There, she bore her first child at the age of eighteen and soon thereafter left the banks of Big Tumbling Creek and the Cove for the first time. Over the years, she birthed several more children, twelve in all.

Living in Tennessee for a while, Mom moved on to Northern Virginia with Dad but eventually returned with him to his family farm located on the side of Barton Mountain in Smyth County, Virginia. "Nothing but a rock pile on the side of a mountain," she often said with disgust. But, she lived there more than sixty
years, until her arthritic knee gave way and she couldn't take care of herself any-
more. Scared, one of the few times in her life, she begged the doctor. "Just put
me in the nursin' home. I can't go back home no more."

The old home place must have held a lot of memories for Mom. I've often
heard her say, "Most of you young' uns was birthed in that old house. Mrs.
Rothberry, the old woman who lived on the next farm, come and helped. Half the
time you was already borned by the time she got there. The doctor come out two
or three days later and checked ya'll over. Why, I remember when Luther was
borned. I sent Ruth to get Mrs. Rothberry and kept Violet home to help me.
While he was a-comin' out Mrs. Rothberry was a-crawlin' in through a hole in the
fence in the corner of the front yard and Violet was just a-screamin', yellin' for her
to hurry up. By the time she got to the house, Luther had already been borned."

"Virginia, what's the name of that county up next to Roanoke?"

"Bedford County is south of Roanoke."

"Which county?"

"Bedford."

She stares into space for a moment, trying to comprehend.

"What county did you say was up next to Roanoke?"

"Bedford County, Mom, Bedford."

"Oh! Bedford County?" She repeats the answer with a question, as
though she still can't understand.

The room settles into quiet once more as Mom continues mumbling to her-
self for a while. Stopping, she stares at the floor, lips moving in silence.

Mom prided herself on strength and hard work. She asked for very little
help from anyone. She never complained much either but I do remember her
muttering on occasion about Dad, apparently a hard man to live with all those years. "No matter what I had to do in the house, your daddy wanted me to lead the horse through the balk between the corn rows while he guided the plow. If the mare stepped on one plant, he’s blame me. Why, he’d put the harness on the horse backwards and then say it was my fault. After workin’ in the fields all day, I’d have to cook supper for him and you young’uns."

When Dad, her husband of thirty years, suffered a stroke, he became an invalid. Paralyzed completely on one side, she wouldn’t hear of putting him in the hospital, especially after the doctor said there appeared to be nothing more he could do. "I’ll take care of him at home then," she said. She nursed him for almost two years before he died.

Years later, and with a great deal of satisfaction, she’d boast, "Your daddy, he weighed almost two hundred pounds. To keep him cleaned and turned so he wouldn’t get bed sores, I’d stand astraddle of him in the bed, pick him up by puttin’ my arms under his arms, and turn him over ever day. I learned how to give him his shots too, so I didn’t have to fool with the doctor. Why, the doctor wouldn’t come out to the house but once ever two or three weeks or so anyway."

"Virginia, I wish somebody would tell me how a computer works."

"Law, Mom, I can’t tell you how a computer works. You’ll have to ask somebody besides me."

"What are they?"

"They’re a kind of machine."

"What are they used for?"

"People do different kinds of work on them is all I know."

"I just wish somebody would tell me how one works."
Mom often told us stories much like the following. Dad happened to be working in West Virginia when this strange event occurred while she stayed home alone. Tinged with the supernatural, an element so important to the Appalachian people, the account offers more than just a ghostly tale of intrigue. For, embedded within this narrative account, a description of my Appalachian culture appears. It paints a picture of everyday life for me while living there as a child. The narrative also describes some of the trials and tribulations suffered by my family and gives some indication of the mores and ways of the Appalachian people. Thus, part of my life story is revealed through this story within a story.

Mysterious Signs

Mom said that one cold winter evening she lay in her warm bed under colorful crazy quilts pieced together by her own fingers. She watched the flames from the stove dance about the room in a helter-skelter fashion. Light from the fire seeped through air holes in the stove door and created bizarre and eerie shapes on the ceiling of her room. Tick, tick, tick. The alarm clock beside her bed methodically punctuated the quiet.

Snow began falling about midday that day she said, and by nightfall, when the storm had passed, the snow covered the earth like a soft, white, cold blanket. It lay a foot deep on barren fields, rocky mountains, flat meadows, and sloping hills. Fence posts, mounded with cold, white helmets, poked through the soft powder. The creek disappeared, buried, and tree limbs, bowed low under
their heavy, wet, burden struggled to stay proud and tall. Snow piled high in the lane. The house, stranded from the outside world, huddled under its soggy, wet, and cold covering.

The heavens cleared soon after dusk she remembered, and a million stars winked at each other from a dark blue sky dimmed only by the darkness of night. A full orange moon rose over the hills, valleys, and mountains. Iron Mountain, hulking to the east, stood dark and silent. The ghostly pale light of the moon made the barren limbs of sleeping trees and limbless fence posts cast long shadows upon the cold, dead ground. The ancient oak standing at the mouth of the lane in the front yard, stripped of its leaves, stood towering, naked, bony, and alone. It shed long, dark, zigzagging patterns upon the deep snow and the house, crouching beneath it, in the shadows.

An edgy calm settled in and a cold stillness amplified the sounds of night animals. From the dark thickets of the Plummer Woods where tall pines moan and groan, silenced now by the heavy snow, an owl hooted. The sad notes of the night bird floated on the still air across the open fields. From the dark woods, thick, tangled, and forbidding, in back of the house high up on Barton Mountain, the keening and squabbling of a screech owl disturbed the night.

At dusk, just as the storm abated, Mom said that as usual she had milked the cow, slopped the hog, fed the chickens, gathered the eggs, and filled the water buckets from the cistern. Rather
than place the buckets on the old cabinet in the kitchen where she usually kept them, she placed them behind the heater stove in the front room so they would not freeze solid before morning.

She carried in coal and wood and before going to bed banked the stove so that it radiated a warm, gentle heat. She knew that in the wee hours of the morning, when the night seems to be the darkest, the flames would die, and a biting chill would creep steadily into the room. Then, arising from her warm bed, she would shake the ashes, and bring the embers back to life again, killing the cold monster.

Mom recounted that she felt restless and ill at ease but didn't know why. Perhaps the snow and the stillness shrouding everything made her feel that way, or, perhaps the feeling of isolation engulfing her did so. For, she knew that when the winds began to blow, as they often did after every big snowstorm, the deep snow filling the lane to the house would drift over the fence posts. Then wading through fine, cold powder and fighting the howling wind as it tossed the crusted frozen white about, she must cross open, wind swept fields and straddle barbed wire fences, making her way to the main road or the mail box and beg a ride to the store or town.

She told us that she could remember this particular evening well for at supper that night she had fretted about where the next meal might be coming from. The cool, dark, cellar, not empty yet she kept reminding herself, still held jars of green beans, purple pickled beets, bright red tomatoes, homemade soups, and numer-
ous jams and jellies. Cans of dark, red apple butter and sweet, yellow apple sauce sat scattered here and there. A few potatoes from the garden lay withered in the bin. Although they had shriv- eled beyond recognition, she could soak them, making them take on a healthy fullness and provide some nutrition to fill hungry bellies. A few wrinkled Jonathan Winter apples lay in the apple bin and she might still find a cabbage head or a turnip if she looked carefully. She kept dried beans on hand. They were rather cheap and so she always bought some whenever she could get into town or to the store.

Where would she get more meat? She had used the last of the fatback to flavor the stewed potatoes for supper that evening. A little bit of lard lay in the lard bucket for frying. She didn’t know when she would be able to get into town again, especially now since the deep snow covered everything. The flour and meal were also running low.

She said as she lay in bed that evening she had worried about many things. Where would the money come from to pay for the food she had to buy? If she could make it to the store she could get the items on credit and pay for them when one of the older children sent money from up north or when Dad came home from the mines in West Virginia. Where would she find the money to pay the property taxes when they came due?

Where would she get money for shoes and clothes? The gunnysack full of old shoes kept to repair worn out leather soles al-
ways came in handy, she thought. She would have to cut the leather soles from old shoes, whittle them down to a smaller size, and retack them to worn out soles as usual. The flowered sacks that hog and cow feed came in made pretty dresses and shirts. The white ones, when bleached, made perfectly good sheets and pillowcases.

She told us that several weeks earlier she had begged a ride to town because June, one of the twins, had a sore on her leg that would not heal. It needed to be examined by a doctor. She had been kicked in the shin at school. At first the flesh around the wound had bruised, turning a purplish-blue and after that a scab had formed but the lesion never completely healed. It seemed to be constantly infected and she had noticed small particles resembling bone oozing out with the yellow puss from around the wound.

The doctor’s diagnosis: osteomyelitis, or purulent inflammation of the bone. Mom said that on this particular evening she worried about hospital arrangements which had to be made soon. It looked like June would spend the next several months in treatment. The bones in her leg must be scraped clean of the disease. Impending hospital bills only added to her worries.

Mom said she worried about such matters often. She knew there were no answers. Things just seemed to work out. We had never gone hungry she assured us. Many times she had fed us on a pot of stewed potatoes or cabbage with a pone of corn bread and milk but we had never gone hungry. Things would be fine she kept
telling herself and June would be all right too. She remembered that such thoughts troubled her as she drifted off into a fretful sleep.

Eerily, in the corner near the front door, a ball of light mysteriously loomed out of the darkness and began to shimmer. It gave off a dead yellow glow. The ball of light moved and ascended slowly up the wall staying near the corner. It moved through the chilly air at an eerie, even pace. Mom moved in her sleep suddenly aware of something unusual in the room. She noticed the mysterious apparition in the corner. She watched, unafraid, as it reached the corner of the room near the ceiling and inch by inch made its way toward her bed.

The dead glow crept to the center of the room. It hovered for an instant about the one light bulb suspended there. Slowly and quietly it spread out from the center of the room, eventually bathing the entire ceiling in an even, supernatural glow. When it reached the four walls of the room it suddenly reversed itself and crawled back across the room to the light bulb. It made itself into a tight ball again and disappeared. Just as suddenly and quietly as it had arrived, it vanished. The room with its creeping cold, ticking clock, and dancing fire returned to normal.

Mom said she lay in the quiet room wondering about this bizarre event for a moment. She got up and moved to peer out the window in the front door at the night. Perhaps someone happened to be prowling about, someone with a flashlight. She saw nothing. The moonlight bathed everything, the trees, the fields, and mounds
of snow in a pale ghostly white. She checked on us sleeping in the back room she said. We were all huddled under our quilts. The alarm clock beside her bed ticked on through the stillness. It read 2:00 A.M. After checking the stove, she recalled, she returned to her warm covers and after much tossing and turning fell into a troubled sleep.

Mom never mentioned this strange incident for some time. But she said she often thought about the eerie, mysterious, yellow glow materializing in her room the night of the deep snow, entering her personal space and pervading her senses. Was a spirit trying to prepare her for bad times ahead? Who knows? I believe she thought it might have been for she then told us about a strange sequence of events starting to take place soon after.

Dad got very sick and had to quit his job in West Virginia. He struggled on for several more years with farming and logging. But Mom said that many times he didn't feel well and, cantankerous and cranky, he took his frustrations out on us. Eventually he became bed fast and later, after suffering for almost two years, died at home.

June's leg got worse. She spent several years in and out of hospitals. Eventually, the inflammation spread to her neck and those bones had to be scraped clean too. June's twin sister, Barbara, stricken with a milder case of osteomyelitis, spent some time in the hospital as well.

My brother Paul developed an abscess on his ankle. With no money and no way to take him to the doctor, Mom lanced it herself. Using an old razor blade, she sliced into the tender puffy flesh, letting the yellow pus flow to relieve the pressure, and then bandaged the wound with clean rags.
About two years after Dad died, the baby, Red, became hospitalized. He spent months in recuperation suffering from rheumatic fever. When he came home he still spent another six weeks in bed. Mom did everything for him under strict orders that he must remain quiet and not exert himself.

Hospital and grocery bills started to pile up. As her meager Social Security checks arrived, she paid a bit back occasionally, if other concerns didn't stand in the way. Years went by before she absolved all of the past due hospital and grocery bills. Never admitting to being a superstitious woman, Mom very seldom ever mentioned the incident to us but she never forgot the night of the deep snow and the dead yellow glow and wondered about its mysterious message.

"Virginia, what was the name of that president I was a tryin' to remember?"

"I think we said his name was Calvin Coolidge. Mom."

"Who?"

Mom, due to feebleness, abandoned the house where she had lived for over sixty years. At first I found it extremely difficult to return with Mom gone for she left everything in its usual place giving no explanation for her actions. As though caught suddenly in a black and white negative, her black Sunday shoes she left parked under the edge of her neatly made bed draped over with a faded and fringed chenille bedspread. Her tattered black Bible lay on a white metal table in a far corner of the dimly lit room. Gauzy curtains, dingy white, hung motionless before each window. Blackened pots and pans, and nicked white dishes remained stacked in the cupboards. Her old black cast iron cook stove with its chipped, white enameled trim stood cold. She left pictures of children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren hanging below sooty, gray-white ceilings on dusty, smoke covered walls. Bric-a-brac lay scattered about. Boxes of old photographs
and other items she left in trunks under the still made beds. Most of her dresses she left hanging limp and lifeless in a back room closet; other pieces of clothing were crammed into overstuffed dresser drawers.

As time passed and sisters, brothers, and others began taking items from the house, it became easier for me to return to the cold, dark, and lonely silence, disturbed only by mice scurrying into dark holes, the slithering sound of snakes sliding over dusty rafters, and the wind whining in the eaves. Disturbed only by my presence, snake skins, draping the doorways and dangling from the loft hole in the back room, wafted in the cool, still air. Mouse droppings lay sprinkled everywhere and cobwebs splayed across dusty corners.

From the clutter, I saved several items: Mom's old sausage grinder, a cut glass candy dish, some pictures, her cracked earthenware churn, a cast iron bedstead, an old spindly-legged dresser with a swing mirror, and a box of old quilt tops. Near the path, running along the edge of the garden, I took a clump of tall, bright yellow flowers; they had always grown there. All of the items are memorable, but the quilt tops and the cracked churn hold especially fond memories for me.

The simple, crazy, quilt tops, Mom pieced together many years ago. She left them in an old box in a dark closet. They reminded me that Mom once had a set of quilting frames cut from the woods. She skinned the bark from the straight hickory saplings, exposing the white smooth wood underneath. Tacking the quilt tops to the frames, she hung them by strings nailed to the living room ceiling. During the day she rolled the quilting frames up, but on cold winter nights she rolled them down and worked late into the evening. She sewed, making the needle, trailing long pieces of thread, go up and down through the colorful quilt
top, the cotton batting, and the flannel backing underneath. Simple, arched, thread lines appeared on the back of the quilt. She worked until the fire died down and the room grew cold.

I can see her now, like a figure caught in an old charcoal drawing: Her glasses are perched on the end of her nose; her black hair is pulled back in a tight bun; she wears a dark sweater over a faded cotton dress. Hunched over the quilting frames in the shadowy room with its creeping cold, she hums the tunes to old hymns and other songs softly to herself. "Rock of ages, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee. On a hill faraway, stood an old rugged cross. The emblem of suffering and shame. In the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shines and I shiver when the cold winds blow."

The old churn with the cracked lid she left sitting in the kitchen behind the stove. I can still hear Mom's voice and the sound of the thick cream sloshing around inside as the wooden dasher moves up and down gripped tightly with strong fingers. She has spread a clean cloth across the broken hole in the side of the lid to keep the cream from splashing out. Mom collected cream after each morning and evening milking. She stored it in thick, heavy crocks in the cool, damp cellar under the house until she had collected enough to churn. Miraculously she turned it into sweet, creamy butter while humming a tune to herself all the while. Ka-thunk, ka-thunk, ka-thunk. "By-o-baby, bay-o-by, by-o-bay, o-bay-o-by." She sang the same words over and over to any tune she chose.

The mice had chewed the corners of the quilt tops. I asked my sister to mend them. She repaired the holes and quilted the two I saved for my children. I distributed the rest to other brothers and sisters. The earthenware churn sits in
my family room now. Filled with sand, brown cattails and other dried grasses spew out its top and arch gracefully over its fat sides.

Sadly, today much of the Appalachia I once knew is found in museums and flea markets, or displayed at arts and crafts festivals. My mother's old quilts are worth hundreds of dollars I am told. Bought, used, when Mom and Dad started housekeeping many years ago, the cast iron bedstead that I saved happens to be a real treasure. The spindly-legged dresser with the swing mirror might fetch a lot of money. I go to flea markets now and see cut glass candy dishes for sale, just like Mom's. Her old sausage grinder sits on a high shelf in my kitchen, a relic from the past. The clump of yellow flowers grows in my back yard and the pictures are part of my collection of old family photos. Her songs and stories are harbored in my mind.

In the fall people visit arts and crafts festivals to gawk at horses pulling heavy loads, sawmills sawing lumber, gristmills grinding grain, and people dressed in garb making molasses and apple butter. They listen to the twang and whine of banjos and fiddles and get caught up in the rhythm of cloggers clogging and flatfooters shuffling about the floor in their primitive dances. People attend conferences where they study the Appalachian culture and listen to the stories and songs of a region fast changing. But, Appalachia is still my home; it is part of my "folk psychology" (Bruner, 1990, p. 35); it is the context for my life history.

As a cruel consequence of change, Mom now sits in her wheel chair each morning, just like every morning, quietly gazing into the white light pouring into the room, or staring at the floor. Her thin pink, cotton duster lies limp about her frail, milk-white legs. Hair, once coal-black and kept in a tight bun at the base of her neck, now streaked with gray, hangs in a limp braid down her back. Gnarled,
Figure 2 - Ella Mae (Dye) Kirk, born May 19, 1903
arthritic, blue-veined hands lie helpless in her lap. Once broad and strong, her shoulders are rounded and slumped. Ridged and creased with deep wrinkles, her skin, once nut brown from the sun and stretched taut across strong bones, is no more. It sags, fish-belly white, around red eye sockets filled with faded blue eyes; they see fuzzy images only. Her gums, toothless, glisten baby-pink through pursed lips.

"Virginia, what did you say was the name of that little hardware store on Main Street in Marion?"

"True Value."

"What?"

"True Value."

"True Value?"

The room grows quiet. Mom stirs.

"Virginia, can you help me? I need a sip of water."

Dad

Born June 9, 1892, my dad, Worley Lewis Kirk died the year I turned six. He farmed and logged for a living and once worked as a coal miner in West Virginia. Sickness forced him to quit. He tried his luck at drilling wells. Sorrowfully, my few memories of him include nothing good. Patriarchally harsh, he lashed us freely across the legs and back with a leather razor strop, made scathing remarks meant to hurt fragile egos, and meted out unfair and unjust punishment. Later, helplessly weak and sick, he lay bedfast and dying. Death slowly claimed him. I still remember the afternoon of his death, the wake, and the funeral afterwards.

Taking a break from play, and after getting a drink of water, I decided to linger about the house with the adults for a while. Family members, visitors from
church, and neighbors crowded into the tiny house on that warm Sunday afternoon, June 3, 1951. After dinner, the men, eating first, gathered on the front porch or scattered about the front yard to talk. Normally, Mom would be busy in the kitchen but this Sunday the other women insisted that she rest and stay on the porch where it seemed cooler. The men, huddling together in small groups, spoke in low, hushed deep voices about plowing fields, planting crops, stacking hay, growing corn, trading work horses, and raising cattle and hogs.

The women busied themselves about the kitchen eating and chatting quietly to each other amid the greasy pots and pans and piles of dirty dishes stacked everywhere. One person scrubbed them in a chipped enamel dish pan heaped with soapy suds; someone else rinsed them in another filled with clear, hot water; and, a third dried and stacked them in the kitchen cabinet. The women spoke in low tones of birthing babies, planting gardens, washing clothes, canning, sewing, cleaning, or sickness and death.

Smaller children gathered under the huge oak tree growing in the front yard; they played in its cool shadows. Older ones ran about the yard chasing each other, or they ambled up and down the rocky lane to the main road. Still others walked about a half mile down the road to an old mulberry tree growing in the corner where two fence rows met. The huge tree with its thick, leafy, spreading branches happened to be the place where couples went "courting."

Hurrying in from one of the closest farms, the twins carried ice cream for Dad. Even though it seemed to be one of the foods he enjoyed, we had no refrigeration and so older children were sent to bring the frozen dessert home from storage in a neighbor’s freezer. These kindly neighbors also provided ice to help ease Dad's craving for anything cold.
Suddenly, an eerie mysterious calm descended over the gathering. The house grew quiet; the women stopped working; the men stopped talking; the children stopped playing. Someone in the crowd whispered, "He's gone." Mom instinctively moved from her position among the men on the porch and went to the side of Dad's bed located in the front room. After bending over his huge body for a moment, she quietly, and with a hushed tone in her voice, turned and murmured to the air, "Nobody can say I didn't take good care of him." She returned to the front porch while her children, friends, and neighbors hovered around her. A sob began somewhere in the stillness and then everyone started to cry.

Later, someone drove the distance to the nearest phone, about a mile away, and called the doctor. After he arrived to examine the body, and much later into the evening, near dusk, they loaded Dad's body into an ambulance and took him to Marion. The next day Mom made the trip by car and, with the assistance of a son-in-law and some of the older children, she completed funeral arrangements. The day after that, the hearse brought Dad back to the house. He lay in state there for two days before burial.

Relatives living in other states---West Virginia, Maryland, Tennessee---returned home for the services. Aunt Pearl, Uncle Gaylord, Uncle Floyd, Aunt Hattie, and Cousin Roscoe appeared among the many who came to pay their last respects. The mourners heaped the kitchen table with food and drink. Waiting for almost two days, my older brother John finally got home from the military. I remember Mrs. Ruth Stamper, the first and second grade teacher at Teas Elementary School, came to the wake. At one point she took me on her lap and told me that she looked forward to seeing me in the fall. She would be my teacher next year.
Dad's body lay in state in the front room; they opened the coffin each day for viewing. People kept all night vigils during the wake, taking turns sitting by the corpse. A somber, quiet, respect for the dead filled the hot, crowded room where folks murmured in low whispers. Cold and clammy, and dressed in a new, gray-blue, wool suit, the body lay with its eyes closed as though in sleep, its arms lying loose across its stomach, its head resting on a cream-colored satin pillow. Tall pole lamps, standing at either end of the ornate casket amid sprays of flowers sent from far and near, bathed the waxy-looking figure in a dull, yellowish-white, artificial glow. The sickly sweet smell of roses, peonies, and carnations mingled together in the small tepid room. Even now such saccharine odors give me a nauseous feeling.

On the third day, at Valley View Baptist Church, the funeral took place. Opening the coffin once again, the corpse lay sincerely displayed as the long service proceeded. I remember the crying and wailing echoing through the small, crowded, country church that day. With tears streaming down their drawn sad faces people approached the coffin and cried frankly, their shoulders heaving uncontrollably. Weeping bitterly, brothers and sisters moaned with deep heart-wrenching sobs. They clung to each other and offered condolences by whispering soothing words of kindness or caressing with gentle hands. Many collapsed on the coffin and said farewell by laying a hand on his chest or placing a gentle kiss on his cold, ashen forehead. I saw my mother cry for the first time.

Afterwards, in a pouring rain, the long funeral procession, composed of cars interspersed with groups of plodding, weeping people, crawled slowly up the grassy, slippery slope to the cemetery, the black hearse carrying Dad's body in the lead. There, after one last viewing they uselessly locked his shiny casket and
gently lowered it into the ground just after his many offspring, through teary eyes and sad faces, came forward and selected a souvenir from the sprays of flowers surrounding his grave.

They laid Dad to rest amid children, relatives, and friends in the old Kirk cemetery. It lies at the end of a rutted, muddy, wagon trail on top of a high, lonesome, windswept hill. The cemetery overlooks graveled, dusty, and dirty Slab Town Road passing by the church below; Rye Valley nestles in the distance, sandwiched between sharp ridges; and, the South Fork of the Holston River finds its way around steep mountain walls. A lone pine, gone these many years, once kept watch in the middle of the graveyard. The wind, hurrying across the cleared fields surrounding this resting place for the dead, whispered and grumbled incessantly in the thick and tangled branches of the old tree on that dreary June morning so many years ago (see Figure 3, p. 33a).

**Brothers and Sisters**

"Don't never take the same way twicet," Dad reminded them. "An' don't never go there durin' the day. Travel under the dark of night."

Vernon and Sherman, remembered Dad's warnings as they slowly made their way through the pitch black of early pre-dawn. They secretly stole deeper into the dark groves and tangled thickets of the Plummer Woods where they had begun working a new still a few weeks before. After entering the tall trees, they lit a lantern but kept the light burning low. "Who, who, who." Far away, from a whispering pine grove, came the lonesome cry of a hoot owl. Distantly, but still audible, the deep throated baying of coon hounds involved in chase disturbed the quiet. Their barking carried across the still night air.
Figure 3 - Worley Lewis Kirk, born June 9, 1892; died June 3, 1951
My two older step-brothers whom I hardly knew, quit school and helped Dad manufacture illegal moonshine whisky at primitive stills hidden away amid tangled laurel thickets and dark hollows spread throughout Bear Ridge, the Plummer Woods, and the Jefferson National Forest. As young men they pedaled the potent brew to outsiders. Dodging revenuers, they lived a marginal existence in Appalachia, constantly on the lam from the law. Each one married and migrated from the mountains years ago. Living in Maryland, they supported large families, occasionally making short visits down home. Vernon, the oldest, born October 16, 1912, died June 6, 1995. Sherman, born March 17, 1917, died on September 27, 1985 in Marion. He had returned to the mountains after his retirement.

In the gathering blackness, a shadowy figure stumbled over stones as it made its way up the rocky lane to the house. It stopped under the spreading limbs of huge oak tree growing at the edge of the front yard and waited. Inside the house all appeared quiet, the rooms dark.

"Hey in 'air," the slurred male voice suddenly demanded from the gathering gloom under the tree. "Is Ver home? I want ta see 'er."

"Who is it?" came a strong female voice from inside the house.

"I wanna see Ver. Tell 'er to come out chere."

"Ver's in bed asleep."

"God-dammit send 'er out chere! I wanna see 'er!"

"Ver's in bed."

"I'll come 'n git 'er then!" The drunken figure stumbled towards the rickety steps leading up to the front door. Suddenly, the man stops. A stray cloud, hiding the moon, slips away. In the stray burst of moonshine, he sees the unmistak-
able shine from the barrel of a shotgun thrust through a knothole in the door. It waves before his face, inches in front of his nose. From inside the house he hears the methodical click of the gun's hammer slowly being drawn back and cocked.

"Git your ass off this hill or I'll blow it off! Ver's in bed!"

Vera, my oldest sister, born June 27, 1922, red hair, freckles, feisty, and petite fled home very early. After graduating from high school, she took the train north to Chicago but eventually found her way to Baltimore. There, she married, became a widow, remarried, and lived in the city, returning down home often. Vera offered her home to others escaping the mountains. Younger brothers and sisters often stayed with her until they could find work. Just recently she relocated to Floyd County, Virginia.

My second sister Virginia, short and dark haired, born May 24, 1924, married soon after graduating from high school but remained in Southwest Virginia. She and her husband moved to his family farm near Seven Mile Ford in Smyth County. She became an expert quilter and works over a set of quilting frames much as my Mom once did. Thus, she helps to keep alive an important Appalachian mountain craft on the verge of vanishing. In recent years, as a widow, she has taken over much of the responsibility for Mom's care.

Yet, a third sister, Violet, born March 19, 1927, quit school and married, eventually moving to Manassas, Virginia. A widow, she died on March 28, 1994, after a long, painful, and sad illness, the first of my full siblings to go. Violet proved to be quite a character and the following narrative about her offers some valuable insights into Appalachian everyday life.
Val

In her youth, growing up in Appalachia, Violet appeared bold, brass, stubborn, and loud. With time she matured into a kind, caring person who doted on her children, and grandchildren, became dedicated to her church, and had many friends. Good-hearted, she liked to laugh and have fun. Violet grew from a skinny girl into a tall, big-boned woman with dark hair, bright eyes, high cheek bones, broad face, and stocky build. We called her Val for short.

Numerous stories circulated about Val's antics as a young girl growing up in the mountains of Smyth County. At reunions or other family gatherings brothers and sisters often laughed as they recalled childhood memories. Some story about Val always surfaced. Many times such stories dealt with school.

Val attended a two room country school called Valley View along with an older brother and some sisters. Her behavior in the classroom must have been every teacher's nightmare. One time someone ripped the back from a textbook and sent it sailing across the room. It landed near Val's desk. The teacher stalked over and asked, "Now who is responsible for this?" Val piped up just as smart as you please and said, "Was that you spoke or the cat's tail broke?" Of course this smart aleck remark from such a bold individual annoyed the teacher. She grabbed a switch from her desk
and attempted to use it on Val's backside but Val crawled under the desk to avoid the smarting blows.

Another time Val and her sister, Virginia, made a toy frog in school while they should have been working. Normally, toy frogs were made from handkerchiefs but since they didn't have a handkerchief they used a dirty piece of rotten cloth brought from home. They rolled the rotten cloth from opposite edges until it looked like a scroll. They made sure that the four corner tails dangled out of each end of each roll. Next, they divided the rolled cloth into thirds and folded one of the thirds forward until it overlapped the other third. Finally, they tucked the dangling corner tails of the top third into the folded cloth, crossing them inside the tuck. The four corner tails became the frog's legs when pulled and the bulk in the middle became the frog's body.

With a great jerk each one pulled the legs on the toy frog. The rotten piece of cloth ripped in the middle sending Virginia tumbling out of one end of the double cast iron desk, which she shared with Val. Val tumbled into the aisle on the other side. Both, overcome with uncontrollable laughter, set forth the whole class to giggling. The teacher stormed over, switch in hand, but both girls saw her coming and crawled under the desk. She ended up flailing the desk with her keen stick, missing their bare legs by inches as she strutted about sputtering over the interruption.

Val continued through the grades and she, along with her older sisters, attended Sugar Grove High School, about six miles up
the road from where we lived. The school bus traveled over grav-
eled, dusty, and dirty Slab Town Road each morning and afternoon
to and from the school. The cumbersome bus sent great clouds of
yellow dust into the air as it lurched around sharp curves, lumbered
up steep hills, and pitched down the other side. Its passengers
squealed and yelled while the bus driver tried to maintain control of
both. The unruly passengers shot spit wads at each other and
hurled cockleburs with their spiny hooks into unsuspecting heads of
thick hair. They chewed tobacco, smoked cigarettes, and dipped
snuff in the back seats.

One time someone's lunch bag, containing an apple butter
biscuit, lodged under the back seat. The greasy, sticky roll, flung
from the back of the bus, sailed all the way to the front and landed
with a sharp slap against the windshield in front of the bus driver
instead of splattering against its hairy target as intended. The apple
butter biscuit clung there for a second and then slowly slid down the
sloping glass trailing a thin line of brown apple butter and yellow
grease in its wake before the astonished bus driver's eyes. It fell
with a plop into his lap. No one told and the bus driver never found
out who threw the gooey missile.

The antics continued and one afternoon the bus driver de-
cided that he had had enough. He singled Val out as one of the
culprits. Even though she pleaded innocent, he made her get off
the bus for misbehaving. "I ain't going to put up with this no more,"
he yelled at her. Val stomped down the narrow aisle from the back
of the bus. Clambering over arms and legs jutting from the overcrowded seats into her path, she made her way to the front. At the bottom of a steep hill she got off the bus and stood beside the dusty, dirty road watching as it pulled out and began the slow ascent up the next incline. She began to hurry along behind. At the top of the hill, the bus stopped to discharge another passenger. Virginia, seated on the back seat waving and grinning at Val through the dust covered window, opened the emergency door and Val, running to catch up with the bus before it pulled out, crawled onto the bus, hid in the back by ducking down behind the seat, and rode the rest of the way home unnoticed.

Many times Val did things in haste and afterwards, remaining stubborn, refused to apologize and change the situation for the better. For instance, she got mad at the teacher and quit school in the ninth grade. She stormed outside the classroom just as the instructional day began and plopped herself down in the middle of the front steps of Sugar Grove School and sat there. She wrapped her skinny arms around her spindly legs, rested her chin on her knobby knees, and refused to budge. She sat there all day waiting for the bus to take her home while the other students streamed around her as they changed classes. "I ain't apologizing to nobody and I ain't going back to class," she said emphatically when the principal attempted to make her apologize and return to the room.

Val loved to visit Grandpa Dye. She stayed with him some when he lived in a cabin back in the Cove on Big Tumbling Creek.
The headwaters of Big Tumbling Creek rise out of the Appalachian Highlands and tumble and fall through steep mountain gorges. The water travels through tall trees and rhododendron bushes with thick, green leaves overhanging the stream’s rocky banks. The sun doesn’t get a chance to warm the water very much as the creek gushes headlong down the valley. The rushing stream spills over huge boulders in its path and fills up crevices and niches. Dark pools collect here and there, gathering under overhanging rock ledges, amassing in sharp bends of the creek, or filling up deep holes in the rocky creek bed. The water is cold, even in July and August, and those who dare to swim in the icy stream stay for only a short while. They crawl from the frigid waters, lips blue, goose bumps on the flesh, skin pasty white, and teeth chattering, to sun themselves like fat water snakes on the flat rocks near the banks of the stream.

One time during a hot spell while Val happened to be visiting Grandpa Dye, a group of young men decided to swim naked in the creek. They took off their clothes and placed them on the bank near a huge overhanging boulder. Nearby, the rushing stream created a deep pool of cold water. The swift flowing water sounded loud as it rolled, tumbled, and gurgled over the rocks. Its noisy roar drowned out any sound of approaching intruders.

Val, Virginia, and some other girls, walking along the rocky road near the swimming hole, caught the men frolicking naked. At Val’s urging they sneaked up on them and stole their clothes. The
girls teased the nude bathers unmercifully, threatening to hide their clothes and not give them back. The men submerged themselves in the cold stream and stayed hidden under the overhanging rock, teeth chattering. After some time, one of the men decided that he had had enough of the freezing temperature and could take the icy water no longer. He came dripping and shivering out onto the rocky bank. The girls dropped the men's clothes and ran, all the way back to Grandpa's house, with Val in the lead. Grandpa Dye never did find out, for as Val once said, "He would have switched our legs good if he ever found out that we had been so mean."

Impulsive and quick, Val could get herself into and out of trouble without much effort. As the story goes, my father used to make bootleg whisky from a still he had hidden in the thick Plummer Woods. The woods lay beyond the road and across the fields in front of our house beneath the shadow of Bear Ridge. Word got out that Dad happened to be selling his bootleg whisky from the house. Suddenly, government revenuers arrived without notice to search the premises. But, as the strange car turned into the long, steep, rocky lane which led from the main road to our house, Mom saw them coming and became suspicious. She shoved a fruit jar full of the illegal brew into the eye of her cast iron cook stove, covered it with a load of kindling wood and slammed the heavy, round, metal eye back over the hole. When the revenuers entered the front door, Val got scared and grabbed the glass jar from the stove. Kindling went flying in all directions, along with the heavy, cast iron
eyelid. She ran out the back door letting it slam behind her and made a dash for the steep hillside in back of the house.

One of the revenuers saw Val carrying a jar of moonshine whisky and took out after her, slipping and sliding up the steep slope in hot pursuit. But, before he could catch her, she raised the jar above her head and sent it crashing onto a large rock at the edge of the dark woods. It smashed into thousands of pieces, the glass scattering in the tall weeds and grass, the liquid contraband being guzzled up by the thirsty earth. The angry law officer forced her to return to the house, sullen and mad. At the court hearing, evidence showed that Val happened to be underage and so could not be held accountable for her misdeed. With no proof, Dad got off with just a warning.

Val eventually married. She and her husband, Morris, lived in a one room shack located up the hill and through the barnyard in back of our house, their first child being born there. After a while, they moved to Lone Star, a crossroads on old Route II, the main road to Marion, Virginia and rented a little white house near the railroad tracks. When I went to visit them, I would walk to the railroad tracks and watch the passenger trains speed north and south.

At first, her husband drank a bit too much and she used to drag him home and toss his limp body across the bed, leaving him there in a drunken stupor until he sobered up. Val shamed him so much by making him clean up his own messes when he threw up
from too much bootleg whisky that Morris finally quit drinking altogether.

Val and Morris both got jobs at Shanklin Dairy near the town of Marion. Morris drove the milk truck and visited remote dairy farms on dusty, dirt roads picking up aluminum cans full of fresh milk. They were left beside the road by local farmers early in the morning while the dew still lay on the grass and the sun just peeped over the misty blue mountains to the east. Taken back to the dairy, some of the milk would be pasteurized and sold as a liquid while the rest would be turned into rich, sweet, butter or ice cream.

The dairy cases were cleaned often and the old dairy products thrown away. Every Friday evening for several years Val brought us a gallon of the old ice cream, a real treat. We had no refrigeration at our house and had never sampled ice cream before. I still remember the cake cones piled high with the frozen white vanilla, dark chocolate, and pink strawberry concoction. One week she brought several different kinds of sherbet---orange, lemon, and lime. We didn't even know what to call it. I remember telling her we didn't like it very much and asked her to bring ice cream the next time.

Over the hill and across the field from Val's house near Lone Star, the Lone Star drive-in theater stood. Often times when we went to stay with Val during the summer we climbed the hill in back of her house and watched movies on the big outdoor movie screen. People watching the movie from the comfort of their cars below left
their windows open. The sound from the speakers carried up the hill to where we sat in the tall grass under the stars wide eyed at the happenings on the big screen. Every now and again we "hayed" the grazing cattle away.

I don't remember the names of any of the movies but I do remember scenes. I remember seeing one movie where rabbits colored Easter eggs as the eggs moved along an assembly line. The rabbits placed the colored eggs in an Easter baskets. In another, tumble weeds rolled through the deserted streets of a desert ghost town; a saloon sign in the shape of a boot squeaked back and forth in a strong, swishing wind; coyotes yipped in the dark, while a full moon bathed everything in pale moonlight. And, in another, an ocean liner, caught in a violent storm, rolled and pitched about. The frightened passengers, screaming and crying with fear, clung to the decks of the ship as wave after wave washed across its hull. The wind howled and the rain came down in torrents as the doomed vessel wallowed in the maelstrom.

Val and Morris left Appalachia in the fifties in search of better work and a better life. They moved to Baltimore for a while but eventually settled in Manassas, Virginia. Their second child happened to be born there. Val's frankness and boldness never left her. One time a police officer reprimanded her for pushing one of her children along a busy road in Northern Virginia in a stroller. He told her she could not push non-motorized vehicles along state roads. Without fanfare, she moved to the front of the stroller and
started to pull it along the highway, saying, "If I can't push it, I'll pull it then. Is there any law against that?"

Every summer Val and Morris came back to the mountains of Southwest Virginia to visit for a week or two. Val loved to go on outings. When they came down home she would, along with other family members living in Smyth County, fry chicken, make potato salad, bake cakes and pies, and mix gallons of Kool Aid for picnics. On Sundays after church we loaded into cars and trucks and went to such places as the Hurricane back on Comer's Creek. We played in the water flowing swift and cold from beneath the thick, green rhododendron bushes and ate on picnic tables under the tall oaks and poplars stretching toward heaven. We traveled to Backbone Rock, a stone bridge drilled from solid rock formations in the high mountains down near the North Carolina border. There, we ate lunch beside a stream strewn with large, flat rocks and splashed in the creek in the heat of late afternoon. We drove to Hungry Mother State Park near Marion with its man-made lake and sandy beach. We ate and played under the tall, green hemlock trees growing there, thick, towering, and dark. Often we visited Grandpa Dye back on Big Tumbling Creek down near Saltville.

Once, I remember we went to Tater Creek in Grayson County near the North Carolina line where Morris had been born. To get there we ferried across the New River on a raft. The drivers drove our cars and trucks onto the heavy, bulky, wide, and flat-bottomed ferryboat attached to a thick, metal, sagging cable stretching
from bank to bank. The ferryman pulled the ark-like boat laden with cars across the wide, slow moving river. He used a pole to shove us forward and the drooping cable as a guide wire. We ate our picnic lunch in the overgrown yard of Morris's old home place. The abandoned, dilapidated house with its faded clapboard walls, crumbling chimney, and broken windows stood alone in a clearing fast being overtaken by thick brush and tall weeds. Afterwards, Val waded Tater Creek up to her knees to get at the fat, bluish-black, wild raspberries dangling in wads over the shallow water from the thorny, arched vines.

At fifteen years of age, I left Appalachia for temporary work in Fairfax, Virginia. My older brother found me a job working over the summer in a sheet metal shop. I stayed with him during the week but often visited Val on the week ends. She encouraged me to save my earnings. Unfamiliar, as well as too afraid and naive to deal with banking, I asked her to hold my money for me, hiding it in a ceramic wall hanging in her kitchen. She returned it all to me when I came back to Marion in the fall to attend school. She and Morris took me on picnics to the Great Falls of the Potomac, Manassas Battlefield Park, or the National Zoo in Washington, D. C. Occasionally, we traveled to Baltimore to visit our older sister. Val always made foods I liked. I still have one of her old recipes for peach dessert.

Peach Dessert

Soften 1 tablespoon gelatin powder in 1/4 cup cold water 5 min. Cream 1/2 cup butter, add 1 cup confectioner's sugar and blend in 2 egg yolks. Cook over
low heat until thick, stir constantly, remove from heat, add gelatin and stir until dissolved. Cool slightly, add 1/2 lb. miniature marshmallows, blend and chill until mixture begins to thicken. Fold in 4 cups peaches and 2 egg whites. (Beat whites until stiff.) Use graham cracker crumbs for crust and top.

After Morris died in 1984, Val changed. She never seemed to be content and her health began to decline. Diagnosed with both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, she wasted away in both mind, body, and spirit. Her vision began to dim and she shook constantly, becoming more feeble as time went by. She began to lose her memory, forgetting people's names and faces and not knowing her whereabouts. Each year at family reunions or other family gatherings her feebleness grew more obvious. Val's trips down home became infrequent; she appeared at family gatherings less and less often.

Due to my own family responsibilities, school, and work I had not seen Val for a while and so in the fall of 1993, while in the Manassas area, I decided to pay her a visit. My last. I went to see her on a hot and humid day. Waves of heat glided up from the burning parking lot like dancing snakes from a snake charmer's basket. Trees and plants bordering this arid desert of black pavement took on a faded waxy appearance and looked as though they might melt in the scorching noonday sun. I stepped from my car and walked quickly up the ramp to Annaburg Manor Nursing Home. Like the arms of a robust, overweight aunt, the automatic doors flung wide to greet me as I approached. I entered a rounded, cavernous, lobby with Greek columns jutting upward.
A young man, seated at a piano hidden in the shadows, let his nimble fingers play across the piano keys in a delicate dance. "Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee." The strains of the familiar hymn drifted across the hot, quiet, sunny air. Older folks, gray heads bent, eyes closed, lost in historical thoughts, their wheeled legs parked haphazardly here and there about the large room, listened to the sad and haunting refrains of the old song.

High-ceilinged corridors stretched out in two directions from the main lobby. I took the one on the left and made my way to a nurse's station situated midway down the long hallway. I passed by shadowy rooms, blinds pulled against the heat, where older ladies and gentlemen slept, talked to visitors, listened to their radios, or watched television. Some patients rambled feebly, or slowly wheeled themselves, up and down the long corridor, mumbling to themselves. Frocked mostly in pink or blue, loose fitting, cotton, hospital gowns, the patients, their towheads moving to and fro or bobbing up and down, became one slow moving, shuffling, indistinguishable mass of sagging, milky-white skin and wrinkled necks.

Even though the building happened to be old, it looked clean, the black and white tiled floors waxed and shiny, the walls painted white. The place seemed obviously busy but calm. Nurses in crisp aprons and caps administered to their patients and took care of other tasks. They chatted with each other in hushed tones as though they might disturb the peace and quiet, appearing to hold
everything in slow motion. The smell of medicine and disinfectant filled the air.

I approached the nurse's station and asked which room Violet Stuart occupied. The nurse told me to take the elevator near the lobby to the fourth floor and go to room 421 in the west wing. I walked back to the elevator and boarded it along with several other visitors, patients, and nursing staff.

I left the elevator and moved down another long hallway. The patients on this floor looked even more feeble and helpless than those moving freely about the hallways near the main entrance. Several wandered about aimlessly babbling incoherently to themselves. Others pleaded for help from their hospital beds or stretched out bony, blue-veined, feeble hands for comfort from their wheelchairs. "Help!" "Help!" "Please help me," they begged. Trying to ignore their pitiful cries, I continued along the wide corridor peeping cautiously into rooms along the way. I stopped at the door of 421 and peered inside.

Nothing moved in the dimly lit room. The shrunken, tiny figure lying in one of the beds kept its back to the door. Too small, it could not possibly be Val. I must have entered the wrong room or she must be out. I wandered on down the hallway eventually reaching the nurse's station. I asked the nurse on duty the location of Violet Stuart's room. "Room 421," she said. I had bypassed it. I backtracked to where I had stopped a few minutes earlier.
I stepped inside. Val must be sleeping I thought. Not wanting to disturb her I decided to wait a few minutes before announcing my arrival and looking about I noticed two small black-and-white pictures taped haphazardly above the bed. Two snapshots, one of a little girl dressed in a frilly white Easter dress, the other of a chubby baby boy in short, bibbed pants, diapers peeping out from around the edges, glared back at me. Her children many years before.

Not doing well, people told me not to be surprised when I went to see Val. The visit would be for my own benefit and not hers. She probably would not recognize me, they warned. Yet, I anticipated seeing the old Val, the one who had always been lively and full of life. Broad shouldered and big, I knew she would rush towards me, grabbing me in a big bear hug as she had always done. I expected to see her rounded brown face with its high cheek-bones and wide-set dark sparkling eyes break into a broad grin at my appearance. Her mouth, flying open, would admonish me for taking so long in coming to see her. We would laugh about how hard she made it to find her hidden safely away among all these old folks. She might laughingly say that she needed some wrinkle cream since a few wrinkles had started to form spider webs about her eyes and create crazy, zigzag patterns across her forehead. I would tell her that she needed to dye her hair. White hairs had started to collect here and there among the black strands.
We'd laugh about how, after all those years of trying to lose weight, she now looked quite a bit thinner.

I reached forward and touched the bent figure on the shoulder. The body felt bony beneath my touch. "Val," I said. "Do you know who this is?" Slowly the covered form turned to face me. Her emaciated body, pulled into a fetal position, made the act almost impossible. She feebly raised her pitiful head and painfully turned her tired shoulders in my direction. That simple movement seemed to take all the strength she could manage. Her eyes, watery and weak, sank into a skull covered with thin papery white skin. Her gray hair, cut short, lay limp and straight upon her pillow. The muscles in her face had gone slack; she had lost her teeth. Her chin and nose almost touched each time she made a chewing motion; this she did constantly. Dripped from the corners of her mouth. Her skin looked pasty and felt cold to the touch. Her frail hands, so painfully drawn into tight fists, made her fingernails, even though cut short, still drill into the palms of her hands leaving small indentations and bloody bruises in the flesh. The skin around her nostrils, dry and red as though from too much wiping, looked painful. The flimsy hospital gown and thin sheet covering her sickly body revealed bony hips, skinny legs, and match stick arms. A bulky diaper, obvious beneath her thin gown and blanket, created an awkward bulge.

I stood there, stunned, not knowing what to do. This gaunt form could not possibly be my big sister Val. Tears welled up from
deep within, filled my eyes, and ran down my cheeks, spilling onto her clean sheets.

"Val," I managed to choke out. "This is Luther. Do you remember me?"

She started to mumble and I had to listen carefully because she could not talk above a faint whisper. "Luther, I loved him so much," she murmured.

I tried once again, "Violet, do you remember Luther?"

I bent closer to hear her feeble mumbling. "Luther, I loved him so much," she whispered again.

Suddenly I knew. Val did not recognize me. She had no idea who I might be. Quietly and slowly, as though drugged, she shut her eyes and returned to her fetal position. I could not get her to stir again. I stood alone in the silent room and stared at her emaciated form and the pictures of her two children taped above her bed.

I bent forward and kissed Val on her cold forehead. I left the darkened room and wandered back through the teeming mass of aging, slow moving, tired flesh surrounding me. Making my way back to the car parked in the steamy parking lot, I wept quietly to myself, ashamed. Why had I not come to see Val sooner? Where had the years gone? Would this be my destiny? That visit happened to be the last time I ever saw her alive. One year later, on Monday, March 28, 1994, Val died quietly in her sleep at the age of 67 (see Figure 4, p. 52a).
Figure 4 - Val, born March 19, 1927; died March 28, 1994
After reflecting upon this story and then authoring it, I cannot view the aging process and the passage of time as I once did. The narrative is a piece of my life. I conversed with my older sister Virginia several times before combining her information with what I already knew into a story of fond memories and mortality.

After Val came John. Born January 17, 1929, he dropped out of school and left home at the age of fifteen. Bright red hair, freckles, and eventually growing to over six feet tall, he fled partly because of the poverty surrounding him but mostly due to Dad's unreasonable demands and harsh punishments. So one morning, just as the rising sun routed the dark shadows hiding in the nooks and crannies of mountain hollows, he hitchhiked north. Restless and wandering, he made his way south, rambling about South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida for several years. Eventually he headed north again and found permanent work in Baltimore. He married, very seldom ever coming back home. I barely knew him. In recent years, he returns to the mountains more often, especially since his wife's death.

A fourth sister Ruth, raven haired, dark complexioned, and small quit school and went to work. At first she helped Dad cut logs and farm. Once, just briefly, she went to Baltimore. But, she said, "Dad called me back home to help hoe corn." After a while she found work in a sewing factory in Marion. Ruth married soon after Dad's death but remained in Smyth County, moving to a tenant farm near Riverside. Getting to her house required passing through several cattle gates, one located beside a large cemetery. The house sat amid several apple trees far back off the main road on a rocky bluff overlooking the river. Dense brush and trees covered the steep slope in front of the house. In the late evening dark shadows gathered under the shady apple trees clustered about the house.
and then stalked quietly into its dimly lit rooms. An aged pendulum clock ticked loudly and methodically, crouched on a mantle hidden in the gathering darkness. It issued forth a loud, tinny boom on the half hour and a series of orderly booms on the hour. Its noisy presence, crowding in on the gathering silence grew loud, overpowering, and spooky. While visiting Ruth, I never liked to be alone in the house as dusk silently neared. Born November 12, 1930, Ruth too, of late, has become Mom's caretaker, especially since just recently becoming a widow.

My fifth sister Virgie, small and stocky, became a logger. Born April 1, 1933, she quit school and went to work to help feed the other children. Often rising before daylight, she walked behind a team of horses to the top of Bear Ridge and helped Dad and Paul, another sibling, cut timber and skid logs all day long. She worked on the farm too but eventually found work in a laundry and dry cleaning business in Marion. Virgie married soon after Ruth did and left Appalachia but returns down home for yearly visits. She still lives near Cleveland, Ohio.

My older brother, Paul, born July 23, 1935, stayed at home for a while after Dad died but he eventually dropped out of school and went to Fairfax, Virginia, making frequent trips back and forth to the mountains. Born with a bad temper, he exhibited much of Dad's personality. Furthermore, he liked to fish and hunt, especially coon hunt. Hunting and fishing, an important part of the Appalachian culture, particularly the male part, happened to be something I disliked. I couldn't fathom why anyone would want to stalk, shoot, and kill anything. But, in Appalachia, a boy who did not like to hunt or fish risked being called a sissy.

Paul played baseball like a pro. Left handed, he developed a reputation as a fast pitcher and played in pick up games spread throughout the county. He had great bulging muscles and could draw well. He sang and taught himself how to
play just about every stringed instrument related to mountain culture---guitar, banjo, fiddle, and mandolin. He and I were at opposite ends of the scale. The fact that we were so different had an impact on my life. He intimidated me. I feared his temper while at the same time I admired his strength and talents. Later, I felt Paul's influence in my life even more. He found me temporary work in Northern Virginia. I went there each summer during high school and stayed with him and his wife. Later, Paul became a self-proclaimed fundamentalist preacher.

Next came Robert. Born premature on May 5, 1938, he died on May 12, the following week. After Robert, came the twins, Barbara and June. Born on September 29, 1939, they looked nothing alike. Barbara, whom we called Bobby, grew tall with blond hair. June, whom we called Billy, stayed short with thick black hair. Barbara quit school. One evening, just as the setting sun cast long shadows upon the hills, she left for Baltimore on the train. She found work and married but made yearly visits back home. June, sick and puny for much of her life, graduated from high school and found work in Alexandria, Virginia. She married and stayed there for a while but returned to the old home place in the mountains after her husband died. She too has become one of Mom's prime caretakers in recent years.

Next came me, Luther, called Luke for short. Born March 15, 1945, I eventually graduated from high school, after many troubling episodes, the only male in my family to do so. I entered the military and lived in both Massachusetts and Florida. I returned to the mountains after completing college, the only child in my family to accomplish such a feat. Later, I became a teacher, the only person from my family to enter such a profession. Restless and wandering, I am still
searching, trying to pick "the meaning from the noise" (Pagano, 1991, p. 194). I have a desperate need to tell my story (see Figure 5, p. 56a).

George, the last child to join the Kirk family, did so on May 5, 1946. We nicknamed him Red due to his bright red hair and freckles. Sick and small in stature during his early years, he grew into a big man, over six feet tall. George dropped out of school in the eighth grade and left for Fairfax, Virginia to find work. I missed him tremendously when he left. He made frequent trips back and forth to the mountains, and still does, eventually marrying a girl from Southwest Virginia (see Figure 5, p. 56a).

My large and diverse Appalachian family spans many years and falls into basically three groups: the older children including Vernon, Sherman, Vera, Virginia, Violet, and John; the middle children comprised of Ruth, Virgie, Paul, and Robert; and, the younger siblings made up of Barbara, June, Luther, and George. Unfortunately, as my family has aged, we, the younger children, have had to bear the heavy burden of watching our older brothers and sisters sicken and die, along with many of their spouses. Remaining relatively close over the years, such sad happenings have been difficult. But, those still living yet see each other, especially at the family reunion held each summer in our dwindling and changing Appalachian landscape near the head of Hogtrough Hollow in Southwest Virginia.
Figure 5 - Luther Kirk (Luke) (back), born March 15, 1945
George Kirk (Red) (front), born May 5, 1946
Chapter 2
A Place Called Appalachia---A Place Called Home

Upon reflection, my recalled sensations of childhood in Appalachia include a sense of poverty and scarcity. For certain, our dilapidated house offered very little aesthetically. It boasted of no modern conveniences or comforts. Its unfinished walls, leaking roof, drafty rooms, dangling electrical cords, and smelly outhouse all blended together into a feeling of incompleteness. Thus, with my father's early death, and brothers and sisters constantly moving away, a sense of loss and loneliness captured all of life as I remember it.

The word "struggle" comes to mind when I reflect upon my early Appalachian years too. Life there involved a constant battle for dignity. We struggled to stay warm and dry in the winter and cool in the summer. We toiled in the fields under a hot, relentless sun. We grappled with tremendous thunderstorms and chilling snows. We labored to preserve water and food. And, although I never went thirsty or hungry, the threat hung over us like a dark shroud. We fed frequently on cornbread, biscuits, beans, and potatoes. Mom chastised us severely for wasting water. She sewed most of our clothes or we depended on hand-me-downs from older siblings, nephews, cousins, and nieces. Our shoes, usually someone else's old, well-worn, thin-soled cast-offs, we considered prizes. New footwear made the wearer rich beyond compare. In summer, the soles of my feet became tough as leather, callused and thick, for I never wore a pair of shoes.

But, in the midst of all this strife, I remember good times too. I don't recall ever being unhappy or sad, not thinking much about everybody else having more than me. As a matter of fact, during my early years I never thought much about
life outside the familiar. For certain, as a child I never envisioned myself as being poor. I imagined all people lived the same way I did. After all, nobody had more places to play or things to do. I participated in all kinds of games with my other siblings. I dallied in deep woods, splashed in cold streams, and wandered up hill and down. I climbed mountains and explored barns, cribs, granaries, and hay-lofts. Didn’t everybody enjoy such freedom? For certain, the good times and the bad times I experienced in early childhood helped develop my character and made me who I am. I look upon both as valuable learning experiences for they taught me that the good life involves both pleasure and pain.

My Personal Appalachian Space

My personal “Appalachian space” (Lanier, 1991, p. 8)---the head of Hog-trough Hollow---existed within a two mile boundary of dirt roads, rolling hills, high mountains, and steep hillsides. At a place about a mile below where our house stood, graveled, dusty, and dirty Stony Battery Road merged with the hard surfaced highway. We called the intersection “the forks in the road.” The paved roadway wound its way from Thomas Bridge, located about four miles away, up a deep gorge called Hogtrough Hollow (see Figure 6, p. 58a).

On its way through the valley, the asphalt road paralleled the South Fork of the Holston River for a while before it curved off to the right and ascended a steep mountain depression with a cold, fast flowing, and cheerful stream falling through it. The road bypassed the Lewis spring, the headwaters for the mountain stream, and made its way up a rutted incline past Rich Hill, a cleared mountainside on the right. It cut through the Bonham property, a farm with large apple orchards and huge flocks of sheep and passed through the Rothberry farm along
Figure 6 - Head of Hogtrough Hollow
the way. Finally it came to the top of a steep grade—the head of Hogtrough Hol-
low.

The black ribbon of asphalt stretched out into a straight line and shot past the rocky lane leading up a sloping hillside to where our house stood. A short distance farther on, at the head of Rocky Hollow, and in front of the closest neighbor's big white farmhouse, the paved road began its descent down one steep embankment after another. It fell downward easing around gentle curves and rolling on past open fields, houses, and gradient hillsides.

At the bottom of the hill and across a small bridge, Hurricane Road, rutted, graveled, and dusty branched off to the right. The dirt road went past Hiram Adams's country store, sitting close by the roadside, and passed within a few feet of the store's front door. The dusty, rutted road, proceeding on, dissected isolated farms and cut through a barnyard before disappearing into the thick, spooky woods of the Jefferson National Forest.

After the asphalt pavement's intersection with the Hurricane Road, it continued on and made its way to a flat and fertile river bottom where it met up with the South Fork of the Holston River again, about a mile's distance from our house. For a short time the paved highway paralleled the river once more passing in front of George Kirk's farm located on the right side of both the river and the road. Eventually the thoroughfare crossed the river and climbed on up the valley, adhering to steep mountains with deep gorges below. The road, relatively straight in places, undulated across the rolling, hilly landscape, dipping and rising as it made its way to the community of Teas.

Before the paved road got to the bridge, and to the side of George Kirk's huge white farmhouse, another graveled, dusty, and dirty road called Slab Town
Road, jutted off to the right and went up an abrupt incline. It crawled past Valley View Baptist Church on the right. The Kirk cemetery lay on top of a high wind-swept hill in back of the church. On the left, down an embankment, and across a flat bottom in front of the church, Comer's Creek spilled into the South Fork of the Holston River. At its confluence with the larger stream, the creek dug out a deep pool of water for swimming and baptizing, shifting the deep hole of water every year or so during high or low water. Slab Town Road crossed Comer's Creek within a stone's throw of the church farther on and rambled on its way amid thick woods with tangled rhododendron thickets, through open fields, up and down steep hills, and around sharp curves. It clung to high mountainsides as it made its way to the community of Teas, about six miles away. At Teas, the paved road and Slab Town Road intersected again and the hardtop continued on to the village of Sugar Grove, another four miles distant.

From March 15, 1945 and until 1951, when I started school, my world existed between these two intersections—-Stony Battery Road and Slab Town Road. As a very young boy I never ventured much beyond these two boundaries. We walked to Harmadams's store, as we called it, using the linguistic practice of elision by combining both words, eliminating the vowel "i" and reversing the "ra." (I never recognized it as two words until I grew up and left the area.) The store, nothing but a long narrow shed no wider than a hallway covered with red, stone siding, boasted shelves from floor to ceiling crammed with all manner of items from flour to fishing hooks. A one room treasure chest, the country store held:

Coolers crammed with Cokes,
Nehi grapes and Orange Crush!
Glass counters stuffed with candy bars,
Baby Ruth's and BB Bats!

60
Five cents was all it took!

Craving RC Colas and Moon Pies, but never having the money to buy them, we discovered:

    Crystals in the ditches,
    Sparkling diamonds in the grass!

    Pop bottles!

    We gathered them like Easter eggs,
    And went,
    to Harmadams's country store,
    A one room treasure chest.

When Hiram Adams's store closed after many years in operation, we walked to Tibb's Community Store in the other direction, beyond Stony Battery Road, a distance of about four miles. Occasionally, we walked to Thompson's Store on Stony Battery Road yet another four miles away. Often, Mom begged a ride to town with one of the neighbors, especially after the work bus went out of business. The work bus for many years carried workers back and forth from their factory jobs in Marion.

We attended Valley View Baptist Church and occasionally went to "the forks in the road" to help Mom carry groceries home. She rode the work bus to town and back about once a month, depending on whether she had the money for groceries and bus fare. She left early in the morning and returned late in the evening.

In the summer of 1951, after Dad died, Mom, for some reason, decided to take me on the train to Baltimore with her when she took her grandson back after his annual summer stay. Until I made the trip to Baltimore, I never traveled as far as Marion, approximately twelve miles away, not even to see the doctor. After my trip to Baltimore I did not venture much beyond these conventional boundaries.
again until the spring of 1960. Then, I traveled to Fairfax for summer work. But, after summer work ended, and saving all my money, I returned down home every fall to attend school.

From 1951 to 1960, I helped local farmers plant and cut tobacco, worked in the hay fields bailing and stacking hay, cut and shocked corn in the fall, picked up rocks from the frozen ground to build stone walls, and cut wheat and oats. shocking and stacking the bundles until the threshing machine made its rounds. I helped haul the shucked corn and winnowed grain to cribs for storage.

For all this work, I earned about fifty cents a day. At times, I collected nothing for my labor. My mother never asked for any of the money I earned. I saved it for school books mostly. Free textbooks did not exist. At the beginning of each school year I searched for someone just completing the grade I anticipated entering. I either borrowed or bought their old, dog-eared school texts. Often backless and out of date, several family members used the books before passing them on to someone else.

Before I started working in Fairfax during the summer, which I did until I graduated from high school, I often rode a flatbed truck to Teas and Sugar Grove to pick beans. Early in the morning, the huge truck came through the valley seeking bean pickers. I worked all day long stooped over in the hot summer sun, filling tall bushel baskets with string beans. For each bushel, I earned fifty cents. Some days I made perhaps three dollars. Then I bought hot dogs, cokes, peanuts, and candy bars from the vendors who followed the bean pickers. I always saved a little from each day’s pay, perhaps a dollar.
The Farm

My "Appalachian space" (Lanier, 1991, p. 8) also included the Kirk farm. It lay on the side of Barton Mountain. In the straight stretch of road, halfway between "the top of the hill" and the neighboring farmhouse, a rocky lane climbed the sloping hill to our house. The lane paralleled the fence rows between the two farms belonging to our neighbors. Thorny briars and weeds crowded in on both sides. Poison oak hugged every fence post. Weeds and grass grew between the ruts left by wagon wheels, cars, and trucks. A gigantic oak tree grew at the head of the lane where it opened into our front yard.

The rutted, bumpy lane did not end in our front yard but instead continued on past it to the barnyard where it bypassed a hog pen, a chicken house, a corn crib, and a ramshackle barn. It ran by a one room shack occasionally used by various family members for living quarters. The lane continued on through an apple and cherry orchard, eventually to be swallowed up by the open fields and woods (see Figure 7, p. 63a).

From the front yard, Iron Mountain, broad-shouldered and big, loomed to the east. Looking south, after going down the lane and crossing the road and open fields, the Plummer Woods butted up against Bear Ridge and the Jefferson National Forest. To the west, just barely visible, Rich Hill, speckled with white sheep, crouched below mountain ridges disappearing into the distance. The tinkle of sheep bells often wafted across the calm, still air of early morning and late evening. Barton Mountain reared up behind the house to the north. Stone walls stretched across the hill towards the Rothberry farm. To the left, a gray barn, visible across the tree tops from the front steps, sat in the foreground by the
Figure 7 - The Kirk Farm

63a
roadside. Rolling hills lay in the background and Iron Mountain rose up behind them (see Figure 8, p. 64a).

Half way up the side of Barton Mountain, in back of the house, the rocky land, cleared of trees, yielded open fields. Early on, corn, alfalfa, and soy beans grew there but we used some of the land as pasture for Old Jerse, the milk cow, and Buck and Berry, a team of oxen. Soon after, I believe I must have been about four years old, we replaced the oxen with work horses, one of them being called Old George. Old and decrepit, George, a few years later, fell into a sink hole within sight of the house and broke one of his legs. Since he couldn't get out of the deep depression, they shot him and burned his body under a great pile of brush, hopefully killing the stench of his dead and putrefying flesh before it saturated the air surrounding the house.

When Old Jerse came into heat, Mom said, "That old cow needs to see the bull." Then, my brother and I drove her to the Rothberry farm. We fastened her in the barn and went to find their big red bull, always loafing in one of the farthest fields. We fastened them together for a while, every now and again peeping through the cracks to witness their reproductive encounter. Afterwards, we drove the cow back home and awaited the birth of a new calf in a few months, hopefully a female. We prayed for another milk cow. We had no need for bulls and so they went to market for a little bit of extra money soon after birth.

Mom always kept a small flock of chickens. The chickens gave lots of eggs if she kept them dry and warm. Often Mom marched to the chicken house and caught an old rooster or hen for cooking. She particularly looked for hens which had stopped laying, refusing to support anything that would not support itself. After enticing the victim near her with a handful of corn, she grabbed it
Figure 8 - Looking from the front porch of the Kirk house with Iron Mountain in the background
quickly, holding its wings and legs tightly together, clutched in one hand. The poor chicken squawked and struggled all the while. She placed its long neck across the chopping block, ignoring the chicken’s beady eyes flickering in fear. With one swift blow of the ax, the head went flying into the wood chips, its tiny eyes blinking shut in death. Holding the chicken at arms length, she let the red blood pour from its gaping raw neck upon the ground.

Next, she plunged the dead animal into a heated pot of water. Scalding the bird loosened the feathers so that they could be plucked more easily from the skin. Pulling the wet bird from the hot water, she pulled out its feathers, yanking them free in wet soggy, smelly wads. The air filled with the smell of wet feathers and steaming dirty water. After removing all the feathers from the bird she singed its white hide to remove the pinfeathers, those small hairs just coming through the skin. To do so, she built a blazing fire in the cook stove using twigs which burned quickly, or loose paper. Then, removing the round eye from the cook stove, she held the plucked chicken over the flame and turned it, making sure to singe all areas of the bird, even under the wings. The kitchen filled with the odor of burning hair and feathers. Next, she washed the chicken and dressed it by taking out its internal organs. After removing the gizzard, heart, and liver, she discarded the remaining entrails. She dissected the animal, rolled it in milk and flour, and fried it to a golden brown, heart, liver, gizzard and all. At other times, she boiled it and made dumplings by dropping little balls of rolled dough into the greasy bubbling water with the cooking chicken.

If our hogs happened to lose the rings from their noses, or if they had not been properly rung, they began to burrow their pink snouts into the soil. Grunting all the while, they left small ridges running like plowed furrows here and there a-
cross the top of the ground. Sometimes they rooted the grass out in large patch-
es. The hogs nosed about for bugs, grubs, nuts, and any other morsels they
might find. Often, they rooted under the fence and escaped from the hog lot.
Then, suddenly, we heard, "Lord, them pigs is in the garden!" We chased them
down with Mom's help and herded them back into the pin.

Afterwards, Mom put the rings back in their snouts to keep them from
rooting so much. Straddling the hog, someone grabbed it by the ears and tail,
trying to hold it steady while she used a hog ringer, a metal, hand-held clamping
device. It held the hog ring, a gaping metal clip shaped like a zero with part of the
arc missing. Quickly placing the hog ringer, with the ring intact, in the end of the
hog's snout, she clamped down hard. The ring imbedded itself in the flesh be-
tween the two nostrils. The hog squealed in ear splitting pain. If she had no rings
and no one to help her ring them, she sent us to the hog pen with a sharp butcher
knife. We stuck an ear of corn near the cracks of the pen from the outside.
When the hog's snout appeared, we sliced into it with the butcher knife leaving a
long thin cut. The hog emitted a long, loud squeal. Slicing the hog's nose made
the snout sore, thus keeping it from rooting until Mom could get it properly rung.

Our rocky hillside farm provided us with a meager living. I remember Mom
saying that a few years after Dad died she decided to seek assistance because
she had no money. She made the trip to Marion to speak with a welfare agent.
Upon learning that she lived on a farm, the agent told her that she must sell the
land and move to town. Otherwise, she did not qualify. Mom refused. She
couldn't sell the farm anyway, it never having been deeded or willed to her. Mom
told the agent she would rather raise us poor in the country than in town owning
nothing. At least we could have our own home where she could raise a garden, keep a milk cow and some chickens, and perhaps fatten a hog for slaughter.

Home

At the time of my birth, my ramshackle home in Appalachia consisted of a two roomed house with no running water or electricity. It had no underpinning either, just a mud and stone foundation, creating a primitive cellar under the house. Offering a safe haven, it sat perched on the side of Barton Mountain as part of the Kirk property.

Before Dad died, he started the shell of a kitchen and a bedroom across the back of the house. He tacked a porch and another small room across the front. Gray stone siding covered only part of the outside. It covered the front and went half way up on the west wall, the rest being covered by black tar paper over gray boards running vertically. He never finished the additions on the inside due to lack of money. Mom chinked the cracks in the upper eaves with old newspapers and rags to keep the cold out and the heat in every winter. Yet, snow sifted in around the windows and through the cracks, forming cold, white lines across the beds and floors (see Figure 9, p. 73a).

Often, we sat around the table, Mom at the head, in the shadowy, cold, dreary kitchen, one dim light bulb struggling to shine overhead (after we finally got electricity) eating our supper of beans, cornbread, and potatoes. Snuffling around outside and menacingly rubbing its frosty, white, invisible shoulder up against the house, the unruly wind forced snow through the cracks. The invading and unwelcome chilly white powder settled in a fine mist, like salt or sugar, on the table and kitchen floor. Our plates became frozen rounds and our feet turned icy in the creeping, unfriendly air. Afterwards, we washed the dishes in a hurry,
hopefully before the dishwasher became too cold and the fire in the cook stove went out. Then, we fled to the warmth of the heater stove in the front room.

Many times, Mom dragged an old lumpy mattress in from one of the back bedrooms when the temperature turned bitterly indifferent. She placed it on the floor in front of the stove to provide us a warm place to sleep. The frozen wooden floors in the back rooms felt like blocks of ice to bare feet. They kept us from tarrying too long before going to bed at night and getting up in the mornings.

We usually went to bed in our clothes; they helped keep us warm. Creeping into frozen sheets, boys and girls together, we dared not move an inch after the bed got warm from our body heat. The cold sheets felt like ice cubes to the touch. Often, Mom heated a rock, or her heavy clothes iron, on the stove and wrapped it in a towel. She placed it at the foot of the bed to help keep our feet warm. The foot warmer grew cold during the night. In the morning, we threw off the mound of quilts and, if not sleeping in them, grabbed our cold clothes from the foot of the bed where we had haphazardly tossed them the night before. We made the trip across the cold floor to the warmth of the heater in the front room with haste and dressed behind the warm stove.

On hot summer days the tin roof covering the house captured every ray of sun and warmed the interior of the house another ten degrees, creating warm ovens in all the rooms. With the windows raised, the doors all open, and no screens, flies and other insects ranged freely. Mom always kept a fresh sassafras bush handy for shooing flies away from the food. She sent us to get a fresh one when the old one wilted. We cut it from the garden fence row. Waving it gently back and forth over the dinner table, the irksome flies buzzed away in pesky droves.
We eventually got electricity. Wired by an amateur, light sockets positioned in the middle of each ceiling held a single light bulb. In some rooms the light sockets jutted out from exposed rafters or dangled down the wall on an electric cord. We had no need for wall sockets; we owned nothing that could be plugged into one of them. When we did get a working radio we plugged it into an extension cord and strung the cord up the wall and across the ceiling to the light socket in the middle of the room. Mom bought a light socket which held a bulb and had several plugs-ins on its sides. She screwed it into the one in the middle of the ceiling. Often, during lightning storms, sparks flew, and pops and cracks sounded from the gray, fly-specked fuse box nailed to the wall in one corner of the front room.

Ping, ping, ping, posh, posh, plop, plop, plop, the sound of dropping water gradually filling metal containers still punctuates my senses. Old, rusted, used tin, bought at a bargain, covered the house and the holey roof leaked. Mom placed pots and pans on beds, tables, and floors catching constant drips during every rainstorm. Barrels and tubs sat under the eaves on the outside of the house to catch rain water. Mom used the water from the barrels and tubs to wash clothes and dishes and for baths.

Water gushed from the tin roof during rainstorms. It dripped into wooden guttering nailed under the eaves along the back of the house. From there a wooden rain spout led to a barrel buried in the ground near the back door. The water then traveled through a metal pipe to the cistern located in the hog lot at a distance from the house. Many snakes, lizards, moles, rats, and mice fell to their deaths as they slithered or crawled through the cracks of the old cistern’s rotten covering. They landed with a splash at the bottom of the cold, deep, dark, and
watery vat. Every week Mom fished the dead vermin out, dumping their slick and slimy, or furry and wet, carcasses on the grass. Just about every summer the cistern went dry and we had to carry water from the neighbors using jugs, buckets, and jars. We drove the livestock to the neighbors or to the river once a day.

We carried galvanized water buckets from the cistern filled to the brim with rainwater for cooking, cleaning, and bathing. Stored behind the kitchen door they sat on an old kitchen cabinet. We drank from the open buckets, everybody using the same metal dipper, visitors and family members alike. A chipped, enameled wash pan sat nearby with a slick, dirty soap dish positioned beside it. A half used bar of soap usually filled the soap dish. Covered with dirt from the last hand washing, the soap bar became slick and slimy as it sat in the dirty dish collecting water from each person’s wet hands. A drying towel hung on a nail by the window. When we took a bath, we filled the wash pan full of water and heated it on either the heater or cook stove, whichever had a fire. Then, we bathed in one of the back rooms. Washing one’s hair became a real chore. Bent over the table and going from hot water to wash and warm water to rinse made the task difficult. I don’t remember washing my hair much too often, perhaps once a month at the most and not even that in the winter. In frigid weather, the water in the buckets froze solid, if not moved to the front room by the heater.

For heat, originally a large metal oil drum sat perched on rocks in the middle of the front room floor. Dad cut a hole in the top of the barrel and attached a pipe. The pipe jutted straight up through a hole cut in the ceiling and on through the tin roof to the outside. The crude stove consumed cords of wood and never kept the room warm. A glass of water froze on the window sill in the far end of the room while the stove blazed red hot in the other. During rain storms water
dripped around the stovepipe hole because it couldn't be sealed properly. A tub or bucket rested under the leak. Rain poured around the stovepipe hole in the kitchen too and eventually the floor in back of the stove rotted out. Mom had a hard time keeping the cats and dogs from coming and going through the hole. She placed her big brass kettle or heavy churn there to help cover the hole and to catch the rain water.

Later, Mom bought a tin heater and moved the stove in the front room to one side against one wall. Again, the stove pipe went up through the ceiling and tin roof. The rafters under the tin roof, being much too close to the stove pipe, often caught fire. Then, Mom climbed into the attic and doused the flames with a bucket of water. Still later, she had a cinder block flu built. Overjoyed, she finally bought a Warm Morning stove and managed to save enough money to buy coal to burn with the wood.

It seemed that we forever climbed the side of the mountain in back of the house to cut green saplings or dead chestnut trees for heating and cooking. Every Saturday, and often during the week after school, we tramped up the mountainside to cut wood. Mom usually cut the poles with an ax and we pulled them to the house by hand. We chopped them up in the back yard using a blunt ax or we sawed them into lengths using a rusted and dull crosscut saw.

My younger brother and I fought all the time while cutting wood. We accused each other of leaning too hard on the saw, making it difficult to pull the thin blade back and forth through the wood, especially a saw with dull teeth. We never owned a sharp one. We had nothing to hold the saplings firm except a sawhorse made from nailing two poles together in the shape of a big "X" and then driving its legs into the ground. Placing the long poles in the "V" of the "X," the
wood still bounced around while we attempted to saw through it, adding to our confusion. We awkwardly placed one foot on the pole by stretching one leg as far as possible and then dragged the saw back and forth through the green piece of wood in a clumsy fashion.

A dilapidated outhouse tilted backwards in a corner on the far side of the garden. The toilet leaned, looking as though stiff winds blew against it all the time. The earthen wall caved in around its back side. An overwhelming stench permeated the outhouse, settling on hair and clothes. In summer, flies buzzed incessantly and rose in swarms. Sometimes snakes crawled inside and lay like garden hoses along the walls, or on the beams overhead. We stored hoes, mattocks, and shovels in the toilet, handy tools for killing such intruders.

Trips to the toilet became quick and short on cold winter nights with the howling wind, drifting and blowing snow, and below freezing temperatures. More often than not, we simply "peed" off the end of the front porch before bedtime, or made our way to one of the trees growing in the back yard. Mom always made us keep an old coffee tin under the bed to use during the night. We tried to remember to empty the "pee" can every day but sometimes we forgot and the crude chamber pot became rank and smelly.

For certain, I harbor in my mind many Appalachian childhood memories. On occasion, I recapture those fleeting moments as once again:

I climb the shaky front steps to our house and
push open the front door.
It squeaks on its rusted metal
hinges and stands ajar.

The door has a knothole in it
where Mom once poked a shotgun
through and dared a rowdy drunk
to come any closer.
(He wanted to see my sister.)

The rusted, tin, barrel heater
squats on stones; it still stands in the
middle of the front room, reaching
toward the ceiling
with its one metal arm.

"It never did keep us warm.
Ate too much wood," I can hear Mom say.

The door to the back room,
where we all slept,
the one with the ghost,
it's closed.

I remember.

Mom and Dad slept in the front room,
by the stove.

We slept in the room
with the ghost.
Figure 9 - The Kirk home---Ella Mae (Mom) still lived in the house when this picture was made.
Chapter 3

A Place of Natural Beauty

The farm where I grew up may have been rocky and my house may have been shabby, but both were situated in Appalachia, a place of natural beauty where the seasons controlled our lives and the turn of each month offered some new and interesting activity. In this ancient place of spreading landscapes, aged but ageless, wrinkled blankets of deep gorges and dark hollows unfurled across the sloping sides of high green mountains. Weathered, rounded ridges stretched into the distance and mist rose after a heavy rain, wafting heavenward in a ghostly fashion. Deep dark forests of tall pines grew. The troubled trees whispered and whined to the wind.

Great spreading oak trees sprawled, their crooked limbs created tents, gathering places for dark shadows. Tangled roots, massive and knotted, crawled to the top of the ground and lay there like writhing snakes, creating nooks and crannies for playhouses and hiding places. And, in the fall, acorns plummeted like hail upon the earth; deer, wild turkeys, and squirrels gorged themselves on the bitter nuts.

Massive poplars stretched toward the sky and rhododendron bushes clumped together into tight thickets for protection. Hemlock trees and other conifers painted green splotches across the north slopes of the high ridges. Moss, soft and springy beneath the feet, carpeted the woodlands and fern-covered forests of tall hardwood trees sprawled across the landscape.

Fast flowing rivers picked their way around steep mountains, where occasionally, the water slowed to a sleepy crawl. It filled up deep troughs overhung
with giant sycamores---perfect swimming holes. Placid. Hushed. Lazy. The murky water oozed in the quiet, chilly, dim shadows for a while. Recurrently, the surface of the glassy water cracked open, split by a splendid splash, and a rainbow trout leaped for a buzzing fly. Both, instantaneously hung in mid-air, and then the fish settled back into its watery bed, belly full, leaving concentric circles in its wake radiating outward, rippling ring after rippling ring. All returned to quiet once more. The river, gurgling and grumbling over slick stones seemingly cast carelessly into its rocky bed, slid over them and hurried forward, gleefully fleeing its quiet confinement, running about, amid the trees, through bursts of yellow sunshine.

Cold, gushing, mountain streams tumbled playfully over rocky inclines. The water ran here and there, childlike, seeking deeper crevices only to fill them up and move on. In wet weather, springs bubbled and gurgled from beneath mossy, fern-covered banks. Dams made from the clutter of fallen twigs and other debris over the winter forced the icy water to flee its linear path. It meandered freely through quiet, shadowy woods, only to be collared here and there in tiny pools and shallow sink holes.

In Appalachia, I watched the orange full moon rise slowly over Iron Mountain. I heard whippoorwills calling to each other in the gathering gloom. At dusk, chasing fireflies which rose in twinkling hoards from the tall grasses, I jailed them in glass jars from the cellar. And, just as evening began to fall, I saw white tail deer steal from their hiding places in the thickets and graze unafraid in the fields. Owls screeched and hooted in the dark. Foxes yipped in the deep woods at night; hawks circled overhead against an azure sky during the day; and, Mom
kept half an old horseshoe in the oven. "I'm hexing the hawks and foxes," she declared, "and keeping them from stealing my chickens."

The Seasons

Every day life in Appalachia ebbed and flowed with the seasons---spring, summer, fall, winter---the great metronome of time. Each season brought an abundance of good food punctuated by lots of hard work. But, as incongruent as it might seem, the hard work just happened to be sprinkled with a lot of play.

Spring

In Appalachia, spring arrived bold and showy. On the lower slopes of the mountains the naked trees began dressing themselves in a light green, using more yellow than green from the great spectrum of colors. As though prodded by their lower relatives, along with warmer weather and longer days, more of the barren trees on the next tier of the mountains began to dress. Finally, the trees on the highest ridges cloaked themselves in leafy green. With time, the mountains turned a dark emerald color. Wild serviceberry trees, scattered throughout the mountains, decked the thick, tangled woods in frilly white lace. Redbud trees strewed splotches of coral here and there across the greening ridges. Yellow-orange flame azaleas, wild, untamed, and flashy, bedazzled the mountainsides. Classy pink lady slippers stood proud. Chin up!

Every spring I witnessed anew the crown of thorns, the nail-scarred hands and feet, the white loincloth, and the blood of Jesus. The cross-shaped blossoms of the dogwood trees, sprouting in the hollows, burst forth in jubilation, along with the warbling birds and buzzing bees, retelling the story year after year. Apple and cherry trees blossomed into mounds of pink and white. Blizzards of petals swirled from their branches in the warm spring breezes.
As spring stretched into summer, wild strawberries, blushing bright red and hiding shyly under grasses and weeds, ripened in the fields. Clusters of red-heart and black-heart cherries dangled like earrings between the forks of bushy branches. We climbed the massive cherry trees, clambering awkwardly among their forked limbs, plucking the plump fruit in its prime. Along with gooseberry bushes, their prickly pods filled with a sweet, clear, jelly-like mass, trees of wild fuchsia colored plums grew in the fence rows.

Dewberries, fat and purplish-black, clung to thorny briars rambling over the ground. The vines sawed at bare, unprotected ankles leaving the skin bleeding, red, and raw. Juicy blackberries ripened on arched, spurred stalks higher up. Their claw-shaped, needle-sharp thorns digging at any tender flesh recklessly venturing much too close. In the shade at the edge of the woods, black raspberries grew on domed, purple-stemmed, thorny vines. In addition, the tiny, blue huckleberry turned the low-growing bushes on the mountainsides a smoky gray. The wild berry also loved fallow new grounds left for too long unattended and thrived there in abundance with the snakes, bees, and birds. We carried lard tins and water buckets home piled high with such plunder and Mom turned them into sweet and colorful jams, jellies, and preserves. For:

She baked biscuits,  
every morning,  
warm, toasty, and golden-brown.

We ate them,  
oozing with fresh-churned,  
sweet creamy butter,  
and spread  
with huckleberry jam.
At the first hint of warm weather, we plunged our hands into thick, light green carpets of watercress just sprouting in cold, icy springs. Mom either mixed the round green leaves with chopped fresh green onions and scalded them with hog fat, or she boiled and flavored them with bacon or fatback drippings. The brassicaceous plant tasted caustically of salt but bore a pungent and sweet, while at the same time bitter flavor, unique unto itself. As the sun warmed the land, Mom went out with us to collect the first tender shoots of dandelions and pokeweed plants just peeping through the awakening ground. Delicious! We ate such early spring delicacies with a pone of warm cornbread dripping with fresh butter and washed it all down with sweet milk from Old Jersey.

**Gardening**

As soon as the ground warmed, Mom planted her garden at the back of the house. She consulted *Blum's Farmers and Planter's Almanac* for that particular year and then planted by the signs of the Zodiac. "Never plant your potatoes with the signs in the feet," she said. "The plants burrow too deeply when planted under such conditions making them hard to dig in the fall." She never planted potatoes with the signs in the head either. Then, the plants grew too closely to the top of the ground and the potatoes sunburned, turning a poisonous deep green. However, cabbage plants made excellent heads if planted under such circumstances. Mom felt that flowers bloomed prolifically if she sewed the seeds with the signs centered in the bowels.

Mom followed old, cultural superstitions as well. She always planted cucumbers before the sun came over the mountain ridges and evaporated the dew from the grass. The extra moisture helped the seeds to germinate more evenly and quickly. Chicken manure spread around the onions made the already hot
vegetable even hotter and zestier. When tiny tomatoes first began to appear on
the vines, she discouraged us from pointing directly at them. "Pointing," she
vowed, "causes the tender fruit to blight." Turning black and rotten, it fell from the
vines. Females, while having their periods, she banned from the cucumber patch
altogether. "Such monthly troubles caused the plants to wither and die," she said.

Signs and superstitions may have ruled Mom's gardening skills but the
plants grew profusely. Over the summer they matured into a cornucopia of fresh
flowers and vegetables. Irish potatoes grew in one spot, their vines turning thick
and bushy. In another part of the garden, fleshy russet-colored tubers called
sweet potatoes thrived in the rich earth, hiding underneath masses of waxy, dark
green, ivy-shaped leaves. They rambled over the ground searching for more
space in which to roam. But, near the end of summer, both plants withered and
died. Then, with a potato fork we uprooted the tubers from their sullied brown
beds. Awakened from their fattening sleep, they lay upon the ground in dirty
white and reddish-brown scattered clumps. We lugged the obese, Irish potatoes
to the cellar in coarse, burlap gunny sacks and filled the potato bin to overflowing.
Glass containers of golden sweet potatoes lined the shelves over the Irish potato
bin after Mom stuffed the fat yams into shiny glass jars.

Tall and slender sweet corn plants stood at attention in straight rows in yet
another section of the garden. Boasting golden tassels, fat ears sheathed in
green casings protruded from their sides. The stately plants whispered secretly
to each other. Were they perhaps disturbed by the restless summer breezes
roaming unchecked in their midst while they themselves must remain rooted to
one spot? Or, were they troubled by the long tendrils of the lanky, freely roaming
pole bean plant encircling their feet? With the passing of each summer's day, the
gangling vines climbed higher and higher and long pods of swaying green fringes shimmied from their strands.

Clusters of tomatoes on lanky vines, both red and yellow, sprawled over the ground. Mom never staked her tomatoes. I never knew why. We always seemed to have plenty without all the extra work anyway. Nearby, long rows of green beans and yellow wax beans bushed together in tight masses. Plump pea pods dangled from thick tangled vines. Lettuce, spinach, mustard greens, and kale, all different shades and shapes of leafy green, took up residence in one whole section of the garden. Bushes of green peppers elbowed for space in another long row.

Mom grew beds of green onions, wandering, leafy vines of spiny cucumbers, and rows of bright red radishes. Rotund, faded green cabbage heads rested like nesting hens upon the ground. Purple-topped turnips and rutabagas, dark purple beets, and elongated orange carrots, along with white parsnips, burrowed in the chocolate-colored dirt. Clumps of bushy leaves sprouted from their fat heads shyly peeping above the soil line. Compact vines of different squashes ranged nearby. Mom raised yellow crooknecks and green zucchinis for the summer. Beige-skinned butternuts, greenish-black acorns, and green-striped cucumbers, she dried for the fall and winter.

One section of the garden spot Mom reserved for flowers. Thick bunches of multicolored zinnias—red, yellow, white, orange, violet, and pink—grew in long lines. With tall spikes of deep velvet red, sunny yellow, blushing pink, and pure white, gladiolas marched along in straight rows beside the zinnias. Bushy dahlia plants in such rich colors as mahogany red, deep purple, and coppery orange spread out, overflowing into the balks between the rows. With pastel shades of
pink, white, and blue, the showy cosmos plant, its foliage feathery and fern-like, its stems long and wiry, trembled in summer breezes. Bright orange and yellow marigolds grew in thick profusion.

Mom mostly raised the flowers to commemorate the dead on Decoration Day. This religious celebration took place at the church near the end of summer. Then, she cut huge bouquets from the flower garden and bunched them together into tin cans, glass jars, and old baskets. She carefully carried the brightly filled containers to the cemetery where she arranged them about the graves of loved ones.

**Summer**

Summers arrived, warm and sultry, along with hellish thunderstorms. At the higher elevations pandemonium set in as the dark clouds loomed over the mountains and the wind, rain, thunder, and lightning all meshed together into one tumultuous uproar. This violent and noisy disturbance seemed to congregate over our house. Each clap of thunder echoed through the mountains creating aftershocks of loud booms piled one upon the other. Lightning tap-danced upon the ground, bouncing erratically from here to there. Wind howled through the tough limbs of the towering oak tree in the front yard. It whistled in the white pines growing to the side of the house, pitching and tossing the keening trees about. It slammed against the house time after time, trying, it seemed, to push this bulky annoyance out of its way. Torrential rains pummeled the outside walls and drummed upon the tin roof cascading over the eaves like waterfalls. Water flooded down the gullies washing out gardens and anything else in its path. The wind flattened fields of corn, wheat, and oats. Hail storms proved to be even
more damaging and scary. The balls of ice left trees, corn, and tobacco plants tattered and torn, scarred beyond repair.

Most summers the cistern, a reservoir for holding rain run-off, and our only source of fresh water, went dry. To help save the precious fluid, we drove the cows and horses to the river, a mile in one direction, or to the Rothberry farm, a half mile in the other, for a drink once a day. The Rothberry’s, who owned the farm adjacent to ours, had a spring house. We shamelessly envied their seemingly never-ending supply of cold, clear water which gushed from under a hill, passing through the spring house and into a cement trough on the outside. Splashing over the rim of the trough, the cool liquid trickled across their rocky barnyard to the hog lot before pooling and disappearing into the woods. During dry spells, we carried water for drinking, cooking, and an occasional bath from the Rothberry’s spring and from other neighboring farms too. Most people never thought much about water. For us, it became a priceless commodity, a luxury. My mother resented anybody wasting it.

Every summer I sat on the front porch in the evenings with my family preparing fruits and vegetables for canning. I helped string bushels of green beans, shuck armloads of corn, seed gallons of cherries, wash and clean the twigs and leaves from buckets of wild berries, and peel tubs of apples and baskets of peaches. The next day, working over a hot stove, Mom preserved the fruits and vegetables. She packed the foodstuff into scalded jars, washed through “several waters,” sealed them, and stored them in the cellar under the house. With kettles of fruits, vegetables, and berries bubbling and boiling on the stove, the temperature in the kitchen became unbearable. Mom threw open all of the windows and
doors but that did little good. The hot, ninety degree plus heat trapped in the kitchen steadily increased, becoming yet another, sizzling, ten degrees hotter.

Mom made jams and jellies in the kitchen but she canned most of the vegetables in the back yard. This method of preserving took a long time, depending on the amount of food to be canned. Her old brass kettle, filled to the brim with water, squatted over an open flame, the fire built with wood dragged in from the mountainside. She wrapped the glass jars in old rags to avoid breakage. They clanked and banged together as they sat all day long immersed and simmering in boiling water, eventually reaching the magic temperature, making them seal properly.

Autumn

As summer ended and autumn neared, thin shafts of wheat and oats growing on nearby farms, and standing for months in the hot summer sun, ripened into a golden brown. Cut and cradled with a scythe, collected and tied by hand, and stacked into bundles, the yellow sheaves rested on the ground awaiting their destiny with the threshing machine. Yellow stubble fields spread out around them while long black ribbons of squawking starlings flew and settled, flew and settled. The black bird’s whirring wings turned the sky dark. Their constant chatter set up a high pitched din as they flew from shock to shock wasting as much as they ate of the precious, golden kernels. As soon as possible, the bundles of wheat and oats were pitched onto a wagon and hauled to the barn for storage. Several days, or a few weeks later, the threshing crew arrived with a loud and noisy threshing machine powered by a gasoline tractor.

Parked before the barn, someone stood at the barn loft door and tossed bat after bat of bundled grain onto a fast moving conveyor belt disappearing into
the belly of the monster, winnowing the grain from the chaff while inside. The freshly hulled grain fell through a metal chute leading from the inside of the chugging machine and spilled into fifty pound sacks on the outside of the vibrating engine. Callused fingers and hands tied off bag after bag of the grain as one burlap sack after another filled to just short of overflowing. The stiff straw and empty chaff, separated from the grain during threshing, spewed into the air at the end of the roaring machine, leaving great mounds of golden yellow piles. Raked and stored, the brittle straw served as bedding for the animals. Two strong workers, one at each end, tossed the heavy sacks of grain onto a wagon and hauled them to the granary for storage. Once, while about ten years old and pitching bats of wheat onto the conveyor belt of a threshing machine, I stuck a pitch fork through the top of my bare foot. Wincing in pain, I tied a dirty rag around the bloody hole and kept on working. I still wear the ragged scar as a badge on the top of my right foot.

Eventually, scythes gave way to mowing machines. The cut grain, still collected by hand and stacked into shocks, required the use of a threshing machine to winnow the chaff from the grain. But, even that changed. Huge, noisy combines started moving slowly through the grain fields. Wooden paddles, much like those on a paddle steamer, gently bent the ripe shafts of wheat and oats forward. A sharp blade whirring back and forth snipped the ripe reeds off at the soil line leaving a straight stubble behind. The cut grain fell forward and moved up a moving belt into the bowels of the machine. Inside, the machine pummeled the ripe plant, separating the grain from the chaff. Ridded of its husk, the grain moved down a spout to spill into waiting sacks. The filled burlap bags, after being tied by one person seated on the combine, tumbled and fell, landing with a
low thud on the ground. They lay there like fat, lazy hogs waiting to be picked up and carried to the granary. The golden straw and empty husks spewed into the air from the back of the machine, scattering over the stubble in the field, wasted.

Farmers raised allotted plots of the flat, broad-leafed tobacco plants. When mature, the farmers cut the plants and hung them to season in tobacco barns, their acidic-tasting, invisible molecules scattering in the air burning tender lips and sunburned skin, their pungent aroma settling on hands and clothes. I helped strip the brown, leathery leaves from their stalks on damp, wet days in late fall. Graded, bundled, stacked, and then loaded on a truck and taken to the tobacco market and auctioned off to the highest bidder, the dried plant brought in a wee bit of extra money for poor farmers.

Gray barns, herds of cattle, teams of lumbering oxen, and sleek, strong work horses dotted the landscape in the Appalachia of my youth. Heavy stone walls built with strong hands encircled green seas of tall grass. Perched high on the seat of a mowing machine pulled by a horse or tractor, and deftly lowering and raising the whirring blade as need be, I helped farmers cut the tall grass growing in the lush green meadows, turning them into fields of sweet smelling, fresh mown hay. The cut reeds died and after drying for a day or two, stretched out as they were into long rows head to toe under the hot summer sun, became stiff and brown. Then, using pitchforks and horse drawn wagons, I helped the farmers scoop it up and stack it high around tall poles like beehives in the middle of the barren fields.

The haystacks gave way to hay balers. Pulled by tractors moving over the cut and dried hay, previously raked into long windrows, the balers scooped the dead grass up by the mouthfuls. The dry, brittle plant wallowed about in the
bowels of the hungry machine for a while. Then, kathunk, kathunk, kathunk, the machine, having turned it into bales, discharged them from its backside tied into neat, tidy, rectangular bundles.

Collected and stacked into high pyramids on heavy wagons, I helped haul the bales of hay to the barn, storing them for winter feedings. Barefoot and clad in faded blue jeans and T-shirt, I sat perched high upon the hay wagons as they rolled time after time, back and forth, to and from the hay fields. Bumping along the rocky lane to the barn, I reached up and pulled wads of leaves from the lower limbs of tall trees as I passed by. The sun beat down upon my back turning my skin brown and my hair yellow. Now machines roll the hay into huge balls and leave it scattered around the fields like expectorated cuds from excessively large cows.

The whispering rows of tall green corn died near summer’s end. Beneath mountains ablaze in orange, brown, yellow, and red, the plant turned a dull, lifeless brown. After cutting the dead stalks and tying them into tight bunches we stood them in straight rows one behind the other. Like tired ragged soldiers, the fodder shocks stood at rigid attention. Forming long straight rows stretching over hill and gully, their tattered brown and ragged coats fluttered in the wind. Big, fat, orange pumpkins lay scattered at their feet. Dismantling the shocks on frosty mornings, we plucked and shucked the ears of hard, yellow corn from the dead stalks, using a corn shucker, a leather and metal device attached to the hand and thumb. Carried in wagons and stored in cribs, the ears of corn served as food for the livestock over the winter. We scattered the stripped fodder stalks over the ground for the cows and horses and fattened the hogs with most of the pumpkins.
Mom made pies from a few but for some reason pumpkin pies did not seem to be one of our most favorite desserts.

Inevitably, change came to the corn fields too. We replaced the corn cutters, those sharp little hand held axes of steel, with machines. No longer did fodder shocks stand in the fields waiting for their ears to be plucked. A mechanical corn picker did that, stripping the corn, cob and all from their husks, exposing the golden yellow kernels. The heavy, roaring machine, pulled by a strong tractor, ran up one row and down the other, its metal neck with a splayed hood at the end, stretching above the tallest of the dead plants searching for a stalk which might get away. It spewed the shucked corn ears through its long neck, spitting them into a wagon trailing along behind and left standing the stripped stalks of dead, brown fodder. Tilled under in the spring the fodder returned to the soil, enriching it. Still later, with even more advancements in farming technology, machines sliced the corn plant off at ground level while still green, chewed the whole plant into silage, and shot it by the wagon loads into tall round silos beside the barns.

Apples ripened beginning in late summer and early autumn. The Maiden Blush, yellowish-green with splotches of red, grew by the corncrib in the barnyard and ripened first. We hid them in the rafters of the barn and crib to get "meller" and ate them when they became soft and mushy. Mom cooked them in a heavy, sugary syrup and we ate them for breakfast with buttered biscuits. Small and sweet with streaks of red, Sheep Nosed apples, growing on an ancient apple tree, in an even older orchard, made good apple sauce. Just before frost, we gathered the red streaked, and lop-sided Jonathan Winters from trees growing in the hog lot and stored them in the cellar for the winter.
Apple Butter

Big and yellowish-green, Fall Pippins made excellent apple butter. We collected the apples in tubs from the hog lot before the pigs ate them. Peeling and coring the ripe fruit one day, Mom made dark brown apple butter the next. She cooked it outside in her big brass kettle. Over an open fire, she stirred the pot all day long with a paddle drilled full of holes and attached to a long hickory-stick handle. She preferred dead chestnut trees as a source of heat for "running off a batch" of apple butter.

The mighty American chestnut tree once covered the slopes and ridges of the Appalachian mountains. The tree sometimes reached a diameter in excess of four feet. But, during the summer of 1929, this noble plant fell prey to a deadly disease. A fungus blight spread inland from the Atlantic Coast, ruthlessly killing every chestnut tree and seedling. By the summer of 1930, they were all gone. From ridge to ridge the brown death spread with incredible speed. The wind-borne spores sought out each spur and point, each creek and hollow, and no survivors remained. Forest giants, centuries old, turned brown and dry as if live steam had been applied to their roots and foliage. The dead trees stood tall and straight, like giant toothpicks upon the mountainsides, their wood smooth and silvery gray. The dry dead trees crashed down easily beneath the onslaught of saw and ax (Caudill, 1963).

According to Mom, these dead chestnut trees made the best wood for cooking a pot of apple butter. Therefore, we went to the mountainside the day before she cooked a pot and collected the dead trees for that purpose. Chestnut tree wood burns hot. It gives the bubbling fruit a pleasant taste when the air currents catch it and send it swirling just above the steaming pot. Wood smoke,
mingled with strong cinnamon, tart apples, and sweet sugar, laced together for an unusual flavor. Common fare at all meals included golden brown biscuits dripping with fresh butter and spread with this reddish-brown concoction tasting of sweet, smoky, cinnamon.

Stone Walls

The ground froze in late autumn making it easier to pick up rocks from the fields. Moving over the frozen sod, we collected the cold, hard stones of various sizes, pitching them into a wagon. Working their way to the top of the ground through the alternate plowing, freezing, and thawing of the soil year after year, the rocks made the ground rough and uneven. Often the stones got caught in expensive pieces of farming machinery such as the disk harrow, a machine which pulverized and turned the soil while being pulled along behind a horse or tractor. By the wagon loads, long stone walls slowly materialized across the Appalachian countryside. They snaked up hill and down separating fields and neighboring farms. Today, the stone walls remind me of a New England landscape and some of Robert Frost's (1961) poetry. The line from "Mending Wall" saying, "'Good fences make good neighbors,'" (p. 111) especially comes to mind.

Perhaps this poem serves as a metaphor for my life as an Appalachian. I lived there safe and protected, surrounded by walls of innocence, dwelling in peace with my neighbors. But, walls do come down. Just as frost heaves and hunters brought down the walls in Frost's poem, I harbored a personal desire to destroy my own edifices of stone. I wanted to explore and find out what lay beyond the "dark hills" (Lowe, 1990, p. 67).

To be sure, my wall started to crumble when I discovered another world beyond Appalachia. Frost (1961) declares: "He is all pine and I am apple or-
chard. My apple trees will never get across/ And eat the cones under his pines" (p. 111). Indeed, the smooth apples in my orchard tasted fresh and sweet while the cones in my neighbor's pine forest felt rough, sticky, and prickly. But, to my way of thinking, the roughness of my neighbor's pine cones offered something a bit more tantalizing. Crossing the wall meant escaping my perceived Appalachian ghetto, the tomb which I believed entrapped my soul. How naive! I simply did not understand the poetics of my Appalachian space, neither interiorly, my intellectual space, nor externally, my physical space (Lanier, 1991).

**Hog Killing**

Crack! On an early frosty morning, the fatted hog fell with one shot between the eyes from a .22 caliber rifle. It stumbled back. High-pitched squeals of pain and fear pierced the frigid air. The crazed animal slumped to the floor jerking and jiggling. A worker swiftly slashed its throat with a sharp knife. The deep gash ran from ear to ear running through the main artery and the layers of fat on the hogs heavy jowls. Thick, bright red blood gushed out, flowing freely over the wooden floor of the hog pen. The hog's life source seeped through the cracks and gathering in red pools, froze on the ground below. Strong men, with much groaning and heaving, loaded the fat carcass onto a sled and pulled it to a scaffolding built above a huge vat of steaming water.

Log chains, fastened securely to its hind feet, made it possible to hoist the heavy hog upward. Swaying back and forth, its bloody snout hung inches from the barrel of hot water. Lowered slowly into the hot liquid, the large body stayed there for a while scalding the skin and hopefully loosening the hair so that it slipped more easily from the hide. Raised from the seething vat and lowered to the sled, the steaming, wet, hairy hog dripped bloody, dirty water. The men then
scraped the skin clean using razor sharp butcher knives. Wads of wet, dirty hair began to heap up around the sled. Shaving the hair from one side and then flipping the huge body over, the dead animal’s skin gradually turned white and clean. A repulsive, acrid smell of wood smoke, wet hair, blood, and dirty water pervaded everything.

Hoisted again between the strong scaffolding, a man gashed the hog’s belly from its curly tail to its already slit throat. Tangled masses of gray guts and red blood spilled out. The entrails tumbled into a big tub. The hog killers fed the foul smelling mess to the dogs after removing the heart and liver. Growling and snarling, the dogs gorged themselves on the cast off offal. Mom sautéed the liver and served it with fried onions one night for supper. She saved the heart for another meal. Boiled to perfection, it tasted tender and sweet.

Decapitating the hanging carcass, the men carried the head, glassy eyes, pink snout, hairy ears, tongue, and sharp teeth, into the kitchen. Streaks of lean from the hog’s jowls, sweet meat indeed, seasoned the morning gravy for a while. Mom cut the tongue out and we had it for dinner one night. Lean and tender, the dark meat tasted deliciously sweet after a thorough boiling.

Mom “worked up” the rest of the animal. She cut it into choice parts and preserved it. The men removed the hams and shoulders; she salted them and hung them to cure. They hacked out the ribs and chops; she dressed them, removing the fat and skin, preparing them for frying and boiling. The men cut the rest of the hog into smaller chunks and carried it into the kitchen in tubs and dish pans. For the next few days, a mixture of hot grease, raw and cooking meat, frying sausages, and wood smoke filled the house.
Bolted to the corner of the kitchen table, the sausage grinder, with the help of tired arms, pulverized dish pan after dish pan of pork chunks. Seasoned with herbs and spices, shaped into rounds, and fried in heavy cast iron skillets, Mom packed the sausage patties into glass jars and stored them in the cellar. Sharp knives, wielded with nimble hands, removed gobs of excess fat from any left over scraps of white skin. The chunks of extra tallow, rendering in big pots on the hot stove, sizzled, bubbled, and gurgled. The residual porous skins, baked in the hot oven, released even more of their greasy mess. Pouring the hot liquid through thin, clean, cotton cloths, left nothing but the hard cracklings. The gallon jars of white, thick grease stored in the cellar Mom used for shortening. She made cornbread with the crispy, crunchy, crackling leftovers. We chewed on the rendered meat skins for pleasure.

Larger chunks of meat from the hog’s belly, salted and preserved with the fat intact, flavored pinto beans and other foods. Mom turned smaller scraps, along with other parts of the dead animal, into souse meat. Served cold and sliced into thin slabs, it tasted strangely of vinegar and grease. Some thought the brains, mixed with scrambled eggs, to be delicious. Tenderloin strips lasted for a while, and pork chops too. The salted and preserved hams and shoulders lasted all winter. After removing the nails and scraping the skin clean in boiling water, Mom pickled or canned the pig’s feet. But, sometimes she boiled them and dug the white meat between the bones out with a fork. Some folks thought the pig’s tail, roasted to perfection, a delicacy.

Winter

Often, the vaporous fog froze to the tall timbers gracing the highest peaks in the Appalachian mountains during the winter months. The frigid air turned the
trees into white, ghost-like, odd-shaped skeletons, frozen in time. The wind took up a steady roar and the trees on the mountainsides squeaked and groaned in the cold. Strong gusts picked up the snow and hurried it along in torrents, carrying it far and wide. The wind whipped the snow into deep piles and the lane to our house drifted over the fence posts. Then, trudging through deep snow, crossing the open fields, and straddling barbed wire fences, we made our way to the neighbors, the mail box, or the store, all located on the main road.

Most years the lane to our house stayed drifted through January and February, and even into March. Once, in late March, I remember wash day almost became a disaster when winter decided to linger a bit longer than expected. The wash day started early in the morning before daylight. Mom and some of the older girls carried gallon after gallon of water from the cistern and heated it outside. All day long, working over steaming tubs of hot water, piles of soapy suds, and dirty laundry, they washed and rinsed the clothes, scrubbing them on scrub boards at the back porch. Their knuckles turned red and raw. They hung the wet clothes to dry on lines stretched across the back yard. The clothes didn't dry that day and so they left them hanging out overnight.

In the night, a blizzard stuck. A deep, white blanket of snow descended over the mountains. The temperature dropped below freezing and the wet clothes froze stiff as boards. Fierce winds began to howl. It whipped the snow into deep drifts, covering the clothesline and the frozen clothes. The next day, in the dim light of early morning, Mom clambered to the top of the piles of cold and blowing snow. With the wind whistling and swirling around her, she dug the snow from around the freshly washed clothes. Carrying them like armloads of firewood
into the house, she dried the rigid clothes before the heater stove, hanging them on many heavy-laden clothes lines crisscrossing the front room.

Often, Mom struck out for the store on a cold, snowy, and blustery day in the dead of winter with:

Gushing blasts of icy cold
picking and jabbing
at the shiny black buttons on her black coat,
flapping about her stockinged legs.

And squally gusts of frigid air
tugging and pulling
at the black scarf
knotted snugly under her chin.

Cold white power
hurled with stinging force
at tender flesh,
she ignored.

She turned her back to the abuse
and plodded on
across the fields of crusted white.

Passing through deep gullies
of drifted cold,
she made her way to the store for groceries bought on credit.

For this Appalachian mountain woman knew;
the children must be fed.

Christmas

Christmas usually arrived early at our house, right after Thanksgiving. That's when large brown packages started to arrive from Baltimore, Cleveland, and Manassas. The mailman tooted his horn and left the parcels on the ground by the mail box. We flew like the wind down the lane and picked them up.
Sometimes, when the lane drifted, we trudged through the deep snow, crossing fields and barbed-wire fences to get to them. Most years, as the weeks went by, the pile of brightly colored, decorated packages kept spreading out beneath the tree.

Our Christmas tree, a white pine or cedar, was cut from one of the fields and dragged home. It filled up one corner of the front room. The tree gave off a woodsy fragrance mingling together with wood smoke and wafting throughout the warm house. Shiny, silver, tinsel roping draped the tree's outstretched limbs from top to bottom, crisscrossing here and there. Red, green, blue, and yellow glass balls graced the tips of the conifer's green boughs; they dangled like dainty globules from its drooping branches. Multicolored lights winked shyly, hiding among the thick shoots of the teardrop-shaped tree. Great gobs of aluminum icicles hung in glimmering strings from its prickly needles. Icicles lay scattered about the floor for the slightest annoyance sent them sliding like silver snakes and shiny worms from the tree's slick branches.

I don't know where such decorations came from. Probably from brothers and sisters living away. Perhaps Mom got them on sale after Christmas when she thought she could afford something frivolous. I saved some of the old balls and display them every Christmas in a strong basket. They bring back such memories!

Most of the packages sent from up north included much needed clothes and shoes. Occasionally there might be a toy. My nephew Jimmy who lived in Baltimore, once sent me a small yellow, steel bulldozer for Christmas. I've kept it after all these years. Another year my older brother who worked in Manassas sent me a model car kit. I still have the two 1955 snap together Ford cars with
interchangeable parts. One year, my older brother living in Baltimore sent cap busters with holsters. The roll of red caps made popping sounds every time we pulled the hammer of the pistol back and released it, striking one of them. Mom got me an Indian fort on credit one time because I begged her for it so much. I still have the metal fort with the hard plastic cowboy and Indian figures. But, most dear to me is an old metal army truck painted olive green.

The packages from up north didn't arrive on time one year. On Christmas eve, when there were still no packages, one of my sisters sat beneath the tree and cried. Later that day Mom walked to the store and bought two metal, toy, army trucks on credit. She placed them under the tree so that my brother and I would at least have something to open and play with on Christmas morning. To this day, I can't recall what my sisters received. I imagine they got clothes. The packages from up north came a week later having been lost in the mail.

Starting after Thanksgiving, practice for the Christmas eve program at church began. We memorized Christmas poems and Bible verses for reciting the night of the program. Individual Sunday school classes drew names for the exchanging of gifts. We walked to the church under starry skies on cold winter evenings and stayed after church on Sundays, diligently practicing for the play and nativity scene.

The day before Christmas, we decorated the long green needles of a fat white pine or the faded green branches of a prickly cedar. The tree sat in the front of the church near the pulpit next to the stove, its sweet aroma wafting throughout the warm building. Aluminum icicles glistened and shimmered on its branches. They slipped and drifted to the floor. We decorated the windows with
pine branches and candles. On Christmas eve, the dull, yellow glow of the candles softened and warmed the darkness encasing the small country church.

We created a stage by removing the pulpit from the raised altar. A strong wire stretched across the front of the church and draped with white sheets became the stage's curtains. We pushed them back and forth by hand. The scenery came from different homes—a rocking chair, a table, a lamp, a stool. Bricks colored with red paint, flames scrawled with orange and yellow crayons, a log etched with brown pencils, and andirons drawn in and painted with black paint—a brown cardboard box became a red brick fireplace with a warm, blazing fire.

Every Christmas eve, the whole community gathered for the program, filling the church to capacity. The presentations began after the pastor or a deacon said an opening prayer. Then, young children and teenagers, as a narrator announced their names, walked to the center of the stage. They stood before the packed audience, reciting Bible verses and poems learned by heart for the occasion. Most chanted their memorized lines quickly, often slurring their words and cutting many of them short by dropping their "ing" endings. I can hear them now: "Christmas is the time for lookin' up . . . joyfully towards the heavens . . . of visualizin' with thankful hearts that same star . . . seen by shepherds long ago . . . sheddin' its light on all mankind . . ." (Morgan, 1968, no page). Or, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singin' " (Psalms 100: 1, 2).

Afterwards, neophyte actors presented the play. It usually dealt with a poor family's trials and tribulations, suffering because of poverty, tragedy, or because someone couldn't get home for Christmas. It always taught us a lesson: We should be thankful for what we have; we should always turn to God during
time of need; we should have faith. Young people, and a few adults, played the parts, dressing up as granny, mom and dad, or children. The actors recited their lines in the fast-paced, run-on, sing-song rhythms used by many Appalachian speakers.

The play over and the lights in the church darkened, we drew the curtains in preparation for the next production. The widow candles pierced the gloom with dull yellow glows. The hot crowded room grew quiet. Here and there, a subdued cough disturbed the silence. Every now and then low voices murmured. Occasionally, heavy shoes bumped the hard floor. Babies grew restless and began to fuss and whimper. Mothers shushed them by rocking them gently. They patted their sweaty backs, tap, tap, tap.

Suddenly, someone pulled the curtains back. A white sheet, draped from a wire stretching across the alter near the back wall, created a white backdrop in the gloom. A makeshift cradle stood alone in the middle of the stage. A tinsel star hanging above the white curtain began to glow and shine dimly over the beginnings of a nativity scene unfolding in this quiet country church on Christmas eve. A female voice, in a mountain dialect, reading from the King James version of the Bible, announced loud and clear from the shadows: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed" (Luke 2: 1). The voice went on: "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2: 7).

Mary and Joseph appeared from the darkness to the left, having resided in one of the unseen Sunday school rooms for a while. Mary wore a long blue dress with a white scarf wrapped about her head, her face exposed. Joseph wore a
brown, terry cloth bathrobe down to his knees. Cuffed pants covered his legs; black, heavy shoes protected his feet. A yellow towel draped his head, held in place by a string tied tightly about his brow. He carried a shepherd’s crook made from an old broomstick and a coat hanger bent into an arch.

The couple walked slowly to the center of the raised platform. They stopped where straw littered the floor and poked from the homemade cradle made of cardboard and scrap lumber. Mary bent over and gently placed a bundle on the straw. She sat on a stool by the head of the cradle and Joseph stood in back of her.

The strong voice in the shadows began again:

And there were in this same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. (Luke 2: 8,9)

An angel appeared off to the right. She stretched forth her arms over a group of many colored, bathrobe-clad shepherds kneeling at her feet. Denim and brogan shoes showed from beneath their short costumes. Different colored bath towels draped their heads. The angel wore a white homemade gown trimmed in silver tinsel. A sparkling, shiny halo, made by bending a coat hanger into two circles and covering one circle with tinsel or aluminum foil while pinning the other to her hair, bobbed over her head. Tinsel edged, cheese cloth angel wings, formed by molding wire into kidney shapes, protruded from her back. Pinned to the back of her long gown, they drooped sideways across her right shoulder.

From the shadows, the voice sounded forth once again:
And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you
good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you
is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the
Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe
wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. (Luke 2: 10-12)

The shepherds and the angel moved nearer to the manger scene. The
shepherds knelt or sat on the floor to the right. The angel stood in front of the
white sheet beneath the tinsel star, her hands outstretched over Mary, Joseph,
and the baby Jesus.

The narrator proceeded:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of
Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jeru-
salem. Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we
have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When
Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Je-
rusalem with him. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go
and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found
him bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star,
which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood
over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they re-
joiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the
house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell
down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treas-
ures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2: 1-3, 9-11)

Thumping and bumping at the back door of the church, the three wise men entered. They wore knee-length bathrobes of red, blue, and purple with work pants and shoes underneath. Crowns made of cardboard covered with aluminum foil and edged in gold tinsel encircled their heads. They walked slowly in single file down the center aisle of the church towards the altar, their arms outstretched, for they carried gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the Christ child. The tinsel star above the manger became brighter. The three wise men leaned forward and placed before the cradle a jar filled with sweet smelling soap, a shoe box wrapped in gold, and a rectangular object covered with silver wrapping paper. They knelt before the baby Jesus, taking their place on the left, making the scene complete as the congregation sang "Silent Night" or "Away in a Manger."

Afterwards, with the lights back on, the congregation exchanged gifts. Earlier, as people who drew names had entered church, they had placed a brightly wrapped gift under the tree. Sunday school teachers and church leaders came forward to distribute the presents. Much shuffling of feet, creaking of seats, loud chatter, wholesome banter, and good cheer took place as people craned their necks and turned in their seats to see what each person received. The exchange over, the dispensation of a sack of Christmas candy took place. Paid for through the church treasury, the church elders distributed a brown lunch bag filled with an orange, a candy cane, gumbrops, "mule titties" (chocolate covered cream drops), and hard candies to each church member and child. The bag also contained nuts such as Brazil and hazel.
After a final prayer, the Christmas program came to an end. Volunteers discarded the tree, snuffed the candles, and tossed the pine boughs outside into the cold dark night. They removed the curtain and returned the pulpit to its rightful place on the alter. Workers stored the angel wings, halos, star, cardboard crib, and fireplace in the back room. Then the celebrants made their way home. Some walked while others rode, going to houses tucked along creek banks, clinging to the sides of precipitous mountains, or hidden in shadowy alcoves. There they awaited yet another glorious Christmas season.
Chapter 4
Religion

Religion, oppressive and harsh, filled a guilty need in my family. It kept our very souls in check. We walked to church and Sunday school every Sunday. We attended Bible school every summer. Missionaries came to the public schools. Using flannel boards, they told us many Bible stories. I still remember such narratives as: "Adam and Eve in the Garden," "Noah and the Flood," "The Tower of Babble," "Daniel in the Lion's Den," "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the Fiery Furnace of Nebuchadnezzar," "Moses in the Bulrushes," and "Joseph and the Coat of Many Colors."

We learned about Christ's birth at Christmas, His death on the cross on Good Friday, and His resurrection on Easter Sunday. We were petrified with fear over the awful predictions prophesied in Revelation, the last book of the Bible. We memorized numerous Bible verses: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3: 16). I still know most of Psalms 23: 1-6: The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul . . . . I can still recite most of the books of the Bible. The Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy . . . . The New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts . . . . The shortest verse in the Bible? Jesus wept (John 11: 35). Longest? Esther 8: 9: Then were the king's scribes called at that time in the third month, that is, the month Si'van . . . .
Revivals

Revivals took place each year, mostly in late summer or early fall. The affairs went on for a week or more. Each night of the revival the preacher pleaded for poor lost souls to come forward and be saved. He read some obscure passage from the Bible moving him to a frenzy and inspiring his hell-fire and brimstone sermons. He pounded the pulpit. He cried. He yelled. White, bubbly spittle formed at the edges of his working mouth. Sweat poured from the preacher’s face, drenching his shirt. He begged sinners to come forward before another day passed, before they were consumed by the flames of hell. They may not see another tomorrow he warned. The saved Christians moaned and cried and swayed in their seats. From here and there in the crowd the already saved people responded to the preacher’s awful predictions: "Amen! Oh yes! Hallelujah, brother! Glory to God!"

With an altar call from the preacher, the congregation sang sad songs encouraging redemption and the righteous moved from amid the saved. They made their way to the back of the church where the sinners and backsliders mostly sat. Putting their arms about a friend, a child, a relative, or a neighbor’s shoulders, they pleaded for them to come forward and be saved. With the altar call, I slid lower into my seat, fled into a hopefully unnoticed corner, or stayed seated while the rest of the congregation stood, avoiding the onslaught of such religious zealots.

The holy sang: "Oh, why not tonight? Wilt thou be saved? Oh, why not tonight? I've seen the lightning flashing. I've hear the thunders roll. I've felt sin's breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind
but now I see. Just as I am without one plea, but that thou blood was shed for me."

When the preaching got too loud, and the righteous got too aggressive, and the sinners and backsliders started feeling too uncomfortable, some of the lost made haste for the outside of the church. There, most puffed on cigarettes; others took long swigs from a brown paper bag; still others just took in great gulps of fresh air.

Guilt required atonement and so, persuaded by the congregation and the minister, and in tears, a few of the reluctant sinners stumbled to the alter to seek peace for their troubled souls. They fell upon their knees, sobbing and begging for forgiveness. Pleading for God to wash them in the blood of the Lamb and to save them from the fires of hell, they promised to turn their lives around and become good Christians. Their sponsors went with them, placing their arms about the sinner’s shoulders. They prayed and cried in loud imploring voices, filling the church to overflowing with numerous prayers sent heavenward. They pleaded for God to forgive the lost souls and save them from eternal damnation. The congregation continued to sing: "Are you washed in the blood, in the soul cleansing blood of the lamb?" Later, with the prayerful frenzy quietly subsiding, and while they stood before the alter and faced the congregation, their faces flushed, the repentants wept bitter tears and confessed their awful sins publicly while their sponsors cried and shouted, "Amen! Amen! Amen!"

**Baptisms**

A few weeks later, the newly saved gathered at the river to be dunked, for many, their first baptism. Most of them also joined the church at this time too. The day of the baptism, the congregation gathered on the riverbank after church
with the newly redeemed and sang hymns with such words as "Shall we gather at the river?" or "Are you washed in the blood, the soul cleansing blood of the Lamb?" The new Christians walked one by one into the deep water to meet the pastor's outstretched hands. He stood on one side of the newly saved; a deacon stood on the other. Raising his right hand toward heaven, while supporting the new child of God with his left, the minister prayed, thanking God for bringing this poor lost soul to reason and welcoming him or her into His warm, forgiving embrace.

Told to stiffen, they lowered the new soldier of the Lord backwards and completely submerged him or her beneath the rushing, cold waters of the river. After a brief moment, the saved stood upright again, the water gushing and dribbling back into the stream, their souls cleansed and pure. Amid shouts of "Amen, brother" and "Hallelujah, sister," they waded from the river, stumbling and sliding over slick rocks to be engulfed by the crowd. With matted hair, sopping wet clothes, and chilled skin, and amid tears of hope and shouts of joy, friends and families offered them clean towels and dry clothes and took them home to begin life anew.

Baptisms never took place for newborn babies. Individuals must reach the age of reason first. Children somehow knew when they reached, and understood, this startling concept. However, if children felt the need to come forward and be saved much sooner, they were accepted into the fold. Therefore, some youngsters claimed to be saved at the tender age of eight, nine, or ten. Furthermore, some Christians believed such youngsters to be smitten by the grace of God, called by Him for some divine purpose.
As children matured, they should start to feel guilty and ashamed over such sinful things as smoking and drinking, especially beer, wine, and other alcoholic beverages. Empty gifts and broken promises offered by Satan included such iniquities as lying, stealing, dishonesty, cheating, and fornication. Women should never cut their hair, wear pants, or shorts, and should always be submissive to their men. Children obeyed both parents, particularly their fathers.

Sure anathema followed for sinners who used curse words, especially profanities such as "goddamn" and "Jesus Christ." Just as abominable, "son-of-a-bitch," "damn," and "bastard" condemned their users to hell. However, I always thought it interesting that some people used the words "shit" or "piss" freely and thought nothing of it.

Card players, movie goers, dancers, gamblers, and rock and rollers—all sinners in Satan's clutches. Good Christians listened to gospel music on the radio, but not much else, unless of course, songs from the Grand Old Opry filled the airwaves. For some reason, watching television programs never seemed to be quite as sinful as watching movies. Numerous families, those who could afford one, bought a television set when they became accessible.

Some Christians believed that God in his wrath punished unrepentant infidels while they still lived on this earth if they did not undergo a conversion to Christian ideals. When a sinner's home burned, God's power caused the tragedy. Famines, floods, and diseases—all forms of punishment directed at sinful people. I often heard such expressions as: "He is sufferin' punishment from God for bein' such a drunken sot. God burned his house down. Now that his family ain't got no place to live, maybe he'll start thankin' about his sinful ways." If Christians experienced such tragedies, they, in turn, suffered from Satan's
handiwork. Then, the holy prayed to God for deliverance from such evils. Often "poundings" took place for people, both the sinful and the saved, suffering from such tragedy. A "pounding" simply meant that those who could afford such generosity brought a pound of something to the church for delivery to the family in distress—a pound of butter, sugar, flour, meal, or salt for example. It offered a way for the redeemed to help their kindred spirits as well as a way for them to enter the lives of the unsaved and spread the awesome but forgiving power of God.

Accepting Jesus Christ demanded that sinners give up all wickedness. New Christians put their past behind them and started over. Becoming a Christian meant reaching the age of reason and being held accountable for sinful desires. Through divine intervention, and encouragement from the saved, they finally understood that Jesus Christ, the only son of God, died on the cross to save them from the bowels of hell. Baptism acted as a visible outward sign of casting away all sinful, decadent things and planning to sin no more. Baptism signified further acceptance of Jesus Christ, the only hope of escaping from eternal damnation, as well as a grand entrance into the church.

Home Comings

Near the end of summer, starting early in the day, another important religious celebration took place. The community gathered at the church for Decoration Day. Some folks called it "all day preaching with dinner on the grounds." Others referred to the occasion simply as "home coming." Invited groups of gospel singers and guest preachers entertained the crowd. All three, the singers, the preachers, and the congregation gathered in the hot church for the long religious service. The singers sang hymn after mournful hymn, the songs interspersed
with the hell fire and brimstone sermons of several visiting preachers. After a
midday dinner, the preaching and singing continued until late into the afternoon.

At noon, the crowd feasted gluttonously on all manner of food spread out
on white and red checkered tablecloths along the outside of the church. Each
family brought several boxes or baskets filled with fried chicken, cured ham,
string beans, boiled potatoes, sweet corn, and potato salad. They carried jugs of
Kool Aid and gallon fruit jars filled with hot coffee. Milk cans full of water sat
nearby. Numerous homemade pies and cakes rested on the table---apple,
peach, and cherry---chocolate, coconut, white, and yellow. I find such voracity an
interesting concept, embedded as it is among such devout, Christian believers.
The Bible expressly teaches against such gluttony, mentioning it several times.
For example, in Proverbs 23: 21 it says: "The glutton shall come to poverty."

On Decoration Day, walking, or packed into cars and trucks, people
trudged up the high hill in back of the church to visit and decorate the graves of
loved ones buried in the Kirk cemetery. Although called the Kirk cemetery, be-
cause Mr. George Kirk donated the land, other people rested there as well, es-
pecially several church members. The amateur florists carried lard tins, coffee
cans, glass fruit jars, and other utensils filled with a variety of cut flowers from
family gardens. They placed the elaborate bouquets on the graves. Multicolored
zinnias, tall spikes of gladiolas, bushy dahlia, showy cosmos, and thick bunches
of marigolds brightened each grave site. Here and there store-bought wreaths of
blue, purple, yellow, or red plastic carnations, mums, and roses stood propped
against the tombstones or resting on spindly wire supports. The fresh cut flowers
lasted for a day or two and then withered and died in the hot sun. The plastic
nosegays faded after a month or so. Tossed by the wind, they rolled to the fence rows and lay there dead, cold, and lifeless.

For certain, religion provided a culpable need for my family. Oppressive and scary, I never accepted it much. Years later I rejected my family’s religious beliefs altogether and became a Catholic. I knew nothing of Catholics in the Appalachia of my youth. But, while in the military, I embraced Catholicism and studied it thoroughly before acceptance, a religion of choice, not of force or fear.
Chapter 5

Play

Life in Appalachia certainly involved a bit of hard work but Mom often said, "Hard work builds character." To be sure, she punctuated hard work with a lot of play. An hours worth of whining and complaining about weeding the garden in the boiling, mid-morning sun, numerous trips to the water bucket, and dramatically lolling our thirsty tongues, made her contradict her own adage. For, without condemnation, she'd suddenly say:

"You young'uns 'uv' done enough."
"Go on 'n' play.
"I'll finish hoe'n the garden."

"I git the fender saddle!"
"I'll set on the seat and peddle!"
"I'll ride the handle bars!"

"Feet up!"
"Hold on!"
"Don't wobble!"

Pedaling, pedaling, pedaling,
to the top.
Then down the steep hill,
we drop.
It's a mile to the river.

Faster!
Faster!
Faster!

Whizzing past leaning fence posts,
rattling across bumpy bridges,
sailing around sharp curves,
gliding by hay-filled barns,
breezing past curious cows.
Whistling wind,
hair glued back,
shirts flapping.

Coasting.
Coasting.
Coasting.

Until.

We stop.

It's a long walk back to the top.

Lazing in the old swimming hole all afternoon and dawdling all the way back up the hill to home, my brother Red, my nephew Jimmy, and I complained about whose turn it was to push the bike (see Figure 10, p. 112a).

We wiggled and squirmed our way to the top of the tempting mounds of hay stacked in the barren fields. By standing on each other's shoulders and getting a boost from the bottom, giggling and laughing all the while, we finally made it. Then, by seating ourselves near the edge and easing forward a bit, and with a slight push, we went sailing down the slick sticky sides of the haystack. The hay flew in all directions. It stuck to our clothes and hair and clung to our skin turning it red. It left us itching and scratching. Farmers didn't like us to play in their haystacks. They said the cows wouldn't eat the hay afterwards.

We climbed to the top of the tall fodder shocks standing in the fields. Digging a hole in the middle, we slid down the dark inside and crawled out the bottom. Chasing each other to see who could get to the top first, we clambered up its steep sides and slid down the dark hole time after time. We got the riddled fodder blades in our hair and down our clothes. Sometimes sharp splinters from the corn stalks found their way under a finger nail or into tender skin. Mom gouged them out using a sharp needle.
Figure 10 - (left to right) George (Red), Jimmy (Jim), Luther (Luke)
We clambered into hay filled barns and made tunnels under the stacked bales of hay. Positioning them just so, we made secret rooms and chambers that could only be accessed through a hidden door. We played hide and seek in the barn, losing each other in the dark winding tunnels and secret passages. We giggled and stumbled over each other in the pitch black chambers and hollowed out rooms. The loose hay found its way into our shirts and pants.

We spent hours in the woods on hot summer days. Using an old dull ax and a crosscut saw to lop down trees, we built a cabin just for the pleasure of building it, never noticing how difficult and time consuming the task might be. We cut and notched the poles placing them gently one on top of the other, chinking the cracks with mud and splitting shingles for the roof. All the while we pretended to be pioneers on our way out west. The cabins always rotted down over the next year or two and so we built a new one each summer.

We traipsed through the woods searching for the perfect tree, with the perfect grapevine attached, to make the perfect grapevine swing. The vine must hang from an outstretched limb to avoid smashing into the tree on the return trip after a swing. Taking an ax or knife, we cut the hanging vine so that it dangled just above the ground. A good knot left on the vine helped with traction. Leaping up, taking a good hold of the vine, and then thrusting ourselves forward, we went soaring out over the deep hollow below. Making a parabolic turn, we came smashing back to the landing site. We did this time after time, making our way to the same grapevine swing day after day, until we became tired of the game. Scars cover my head from the soaring trips on a grapevine swing. For sometimes the swing broke and sent us plummeting to the earth through rock piles and bushes.
Hiking through green, leafy woods and trekking up steep, dark hollows and sunny inclines, we climbed to the top of the highest ridges. From the crest of the mountain and gazing into the distance, ragged edged ridges, sandwiched one before the other, disappeared into a smoky blue haze. We rested for a while in the high, cool, thin air and then clambered back down the precipitous mountain-side.

Chasing each other in the dark, we played "Whoopie Hide," a game called "Hide-and-Go-Seek" outside of Appalachia. We pursued each other across the yard during chasing contests and around the house during the game of "Annie-Over." Dividing into two teams, each group gathered on either side of the house from front to back. Someone from one team yelled, "Annie," from the front of the house, and, from the back yard came the reply, "Over." Then, a rubber ball or an old stuffed sock went sailing across the roof of the house from front to back. Landing amid the back team, someone snatched it up and the whole gang yelled together, "Ready or not, here we come!" The back group, the ones with the ball, ran pell-mell to the front of the house trying to catch any members of the throwing team before they reached the back of the house. Those caught joined the catching group and the game began again, except the original catchers, now in the back yard, became the tossers, yelling, "Annie," while the catchers, now in the front yard replied, "Over."

One of our most favorite pastimes for play included cowboys and Indians. The Rothberry's daughter came back home to live and brought with her an only son. He had a toy box filled with all manner of guns, rifles, and cap busters. Chasing each other through the woods and hiding in the barn, pigpen, granary, springhouse, and woodshed, we played the game for hours.
Our fascination with cowboys and Indians came, I'm sure, from the many westerns we managed to watch on Saturday morning television at the Rothberry farm: "The Lone Ranger," "Roy Rogers and Dale Evans;" and, "Wild Bill Hickock." Their returning daughter also brought a television set, the first one I ever saw. On weekdays, when we took the cow and horse for water, we often lingered there, watching such silly programs as "Howdy Doody Time" and "The Mickey Mouse Club." Annoyed, especially when night began to fall and we weren't back with the livestock, Mom walked along the stone wall to the top of the nearest hill and yelled for us to get home. Starting very low and enunciating each letter, her voice rising to a loud yell on the last syllable, she intoned over and over, "Luuuuutherrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr." Her voice ran on until she ran out of breath. Amazingly, she could take a one syllable word and turn it into several syllables all strung together. Red, my brother's nickname, became "Raaaaaaaaeeeeeooooo." Eventually, one of the Rothberry's came into the living room and told us that Mom needed us to come home. When we yelled back, we heard, "Get that cow home so I can milk her!"

We spent hours sliding down steep hills covered with snow. We didn't have a sled and so we made our own by carving pieces of wood into runners and then nailing boards across them. We covered the runners with water and let them freeze slick and hard. If we could find a piece, we cut tin sheets into thin strips and nailed them to the runners. Often, we rolled up the front end of a rusted piece of tin and went sailing down the hill like bobsledders. Occasionally, we shared a real sled with the neighboring child who owned one. Once Mom got mad when we stole the round lid to her wringer washer and used it as a sled. Enameled, shiny, and slick it sent us spinning in circles as we flew down steep
hills only to crash into a snow bank, a squealing, giggling heap of wiggling arms and legs. We brought the lid home all dented and scratched. Mom fussed for a while but plopped the marred lid back onto the washing machine and continued to use it.

When the lane to the house drifted, we designed mazes under the snow tunneling in and out like groundhogs. We cut the snow into big blocks and constructed igloos. We built skating places by packing down the snow in a thin, long line and pouring water over it, letting it freeze. Then, taking "runny goes" we ran forward and slid, squatting down and letting the hard soles of our brogan shoes carry us as far as possible on the slick trail. Eventually, we crashed into a snow bank, or stumbled, taking a flying leap forward.

Many times, as the day drew to a close and dark shadows settled over the land, Mom called us home from play. Late into the evening she stopped along the stone wall, stood on the front porch, or yelled from the top of a high hill. In the descending gloom, she stretched out our names into long syllables, making them echo through the dark hollows. From far and near, we answered her call. Then, trudging our way through the gathering dusk from fields, woods, barnyards, or snow covered hillsides, we found our way home to supper and a warm fire.
Chapter 6
Changes

And then, the changes came to my part of Appalachia, creeping in almost unnoticed, under the guise of progress and modernization. Television antennas started to mingle with the trees. Utility and telephone poles sprouted along the roadsides; their thin cables created webs across the hills. Roads and transportation improved. For sure, the Appalachian people, everywhere on the borders of the mountain country, were being laid hold of and swept away by this oncoming tide of civilization. However, it drowned as many as it uplifted (Miles, 1975).

Unmistakably, each new intrusion from the outside left a subtle message that a better life awaited me out there beyond the hazy, redundant ridges, away from the unsurpassed natural beauty of the mountainous landscape which engulfed me as a child but which went unappreciated for so long. As a result, the unstoppable changes demanded that partaking of a better life meant leaving home and facing a new and puzzling environment. But when I ventured outside Appalachia for the first time, and then looked back, I realized how materialistically deprived I seemed to be but on the other hand how so many other genuine riches surrounded me in superabundance.

As the alterations continued, they commenced tumbling and rolling in, quick and fast. Like distant more sophisticated relatives visiting unexpectedly from afar, they arrived one after the other, only this time to stay, taking up permanent residence amid the poverty and clutter of an innocent people caught between high mountain walls, wrinkles in time. And, often, the onrushing modifications struck close to home.
Dad died. Mom got old. Brothers and sisters, scattering like chickens, boarded trains rumbling through the mountains of Southwest Virginia. They headed north, many of them never to return. All left to find work and hopefully a better and easier way of life, to escape the poverty surrounding them. Some departed because of shame, some because of guilt. One sister recently said: "With so many children at home and no money, I dropped out of school and went north to find work."

As highway projects paved more and more of the dirt roads in the area, cars and trucks became more frequent. The completion of Interstate 81 marked another turning point. It traveled through Southwest Virginia entering at Bristol on the Tennessee border and continued northeast. Interstate 81 eliminated much of the traffic on Main Street in Marion and decreased the traffic on Route 11, the state highway and main thoroughfare. Later, Interstate 77 entered the area at Bluefield on the West Virginia border, bypassed Wytheville, and preceded south into North Carolina. Such modern methods of transportation opened up the area to outsiders and made it possible for businesses and industries to locate in the vicinity. The government surveyed the area, including the Kirk farm, for the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area. The park claimed much of the land, relocating several families and communities within its boundaries. Our farm lies near an outside edge of the sprawling recreational complex (see Figure 11, p. 118a).

Everyday life at home began to change too. Little by little we got rid of all the livestock. Mom clung to a few chickens and the milk cow for a while. But, eventually she sold both. She gave up fattening a hog; it required slaughter with no one to do the task. Left to lie fallow for years, briars, grasses, bushes, sap-
Figure 11 - Mt. Roger's and the Interstate System
lings, and trees began to reestablish themselves in the fields. Nature gradually, and almost unnoticed, reclaimed the farm.

Mom kept on gardening but she bought a pressure cooker to do her canning. Time after time during canning season, the pressure cooker slowly built up steam, the shiny aluminum pot expanding with each added degree of heat. The control jangled right before the seething, whistling, jiggling cooker came dangerously close to exploding, spilling boiling food and scalding water onto the old, black cast iron cook stove with its roaring fire. A handy convenience, the cooker cut the preservation time for foods in half.

When television sets began to appear in the mountains some families bought them. They hung the aluminum antennas high upon tall poles and then stood the slender staffs upon the highest hills to pick up the best reception. Looking like the skeletal remains of crucified souls standing stallwart against a blood-red evening sky, sacrifices to the gods of entertainment, the antennas captured the television waves beaming across the high ridges from Bristol and Bluefield. We couldn't afford a television set so my brother and I went to neighboring farms to witness this marvelous invention. We walked several houses down the road every Wednesday to watch "Wagon Train," our favorite. Afraid of the dark, we ran all the way home, hiding in the ditch every time a car's headlights shot over the hill. The first summer I worked in Northern Virginia, I bought a used television set from one of the neighbors for twenty dollars. My family watched it in the dark. Due to a weak picture tube, the picture came in very faint.

Persistently progress brought more and more from beyond the hills, much of it after I departed. Telephones began to appear, first with a party line of about four people. My sister had one installed because of Mom's increasing age.
House trailers began to dot the land. Perhaps not luxurious by most people's standards, they certainly offered better living quarters than the dwellings that many people in my part of Appalachia had grown up in and had become accustomed to. Mom cast off her old wringer washer for the Laundromat. My sister got her driver's license and bought a car making travel much easier.

In recent years, satellite dishes, like giant metal sunflowers, have begun to sprout from the countryside and sprawling housing developments too. Old farmers began selling their land in lots and acres to outsiders. Now I pass by fields once growing wheat, oats, corn, grass, and cattle and see nothing but houses. Eventually, around 1972, we had a well drilled and a rough bathroom installed. For the first time in her long life, Mom didn't have to carry water into the house or go outside for the toilet. Unfortunately, the water pipes froze every winter as soon as it started getting cold.

In fact, one of the last times I visited Mom at the old home place happened to be in January as she struggled to keep her water pipes from freezing. My wife and I drove down one Sunday afternoon, just after a heavy snowstorm had dumped about a foot of snow upon the mountains. We parked the car at the mouth of the lane, since the snow had drifted over the fence posts, and walked across the top of its thick, icy crust to the house. Occasionally a foot broke through and sent one of our legs plunging into the frozen white beneath. The frigid wind gushed around us, taking our breath with it, as we made our way up the drifted lane.

Mom peeped from behind the heater stove in the front room, not rising to greet us, as we thumped up the rickety steps, crossed the rotten front porch, and barged through the flimsy front door. Her brow creased with wrinkles, her dark
sweater, faded apron, and flowered cotton dress soiled and spotted with grease, and her face streaked with coal soot and ashes, she looked tired. Stranded for several days now, the temperature dropping to ten and twelve degrees below zero every night, Mom had not slept much. Instead she had stayed up keeping a fire going in the heater and the water running at a slight trickle from the cold pipes. Hopefully, such small efforts would keep the liquid flowing and thus help guard against the pipes freezing and bursting. June, my sister, had not been able to get home from her work place in town due to the icy roads and frigid conditions.

We spent the afternoon with Mom. I encouraged her to leave and tried to get her to go with me. But, she directly said, "No."

"You're getting too old, the snow is too deep, and such cold temperatures are dangerous for a person your age," I continued. "This house is too run down and decrepit for you to stay here. You can't sit up all night worrying about your water pipes freezing. You're losing too much sleep."

"Oh," she said, "I'll be all right. Billy 'll be back in a day or two. The neighbors call me ever day, or I call them. Don't worry. I'll be all right."

Reluctantly, and guiltily, we left her alone again in the cold house. I believe the harshness of that winter and the loneliness it generated made Mom more aware of her advancing age and fragile conditions. For after that year, she started to leave the farm and stay with some of her children living in the area. At first, she ventured away for the winter months only and returned in the spring. But, eventually she abandoned the practice altogether and now resides permanently in Marion.
Leaving Home

In my innocence, I knew little about what lay beyond the Appalachian environment of my childhood. For a long time, the blue mountains, piled one upon the other, cradled and protected me. I felt secure, safe, and at peace. I left them occasionally but returned every time. Indeed, even though I craved the world beyond the ridges I prolonged my exodus. But eventually, whether by force, choice, or dramatic changes, I struck out on my own, discovering that my protected life in Appalachia left me unprepared to meet the demands and expectations of a much bolder and broader environment.

At the age of twenty, I did not have a driver’s license. We never owned a car and so, having no opportunity, I never learned to drive. I had no idea how to use the telephone. We never owned one. I remember one time while still in high school, Mom and I decided to take the Greyhound bus to Baltimore for Christmas. We rode the bus all night, refusing to exit at terminals, afraid of getting lost. We sat on the bus in Roanoke, not daring to leave our seats. In Washington, D. C., we changed coaches, a harrowing experience. We feared getting on the wrong carrier. Having traveled by train before, Mom knew what to do and so we safely made it to Baltimore.

My sister sent explicit directions on how to place a dime in the pay phone when we got to Baltimore, and how to poke my fingers in the holes and dial her at home so we could be picked up at the bus station. She never mentioned that with the numbers there were letters too and when I started to dial her number I got confused. Not knowing how to dial her house, I went into the darkened streets of Baltimore in the early hours of morning and flagged down a taxi. Boldly, I told him the address where we wished to be delivered. His being an
African-American scared me to death. Attempting to hold a conversation, he asked where we came from. I told him very quickly in my sing-song Appalachian dialect, "We come from Marion, Virginia." I said nothing else for I just knew that he would take us for a long ride into strange neighborhoods if he thought us to be ignorant and naive "hillbillies."

Another time while trying to use a pay phone in Manassas, I could never make the connection for some reason. I kept dialing the wrong number. The operator got on the phone and point blank asked me if I knew how to use the telephone. Ashamed, I said, "No." In disgust she hung up probably thinking me to be a prankster. So, carrying my old battered suitcase, I started walking to my sister's house about six miles away. But luckily, she expected me at a certain time and came looking for me when I didn't arrive at two o'clock in the morning.

I felt uncomfortable trying to carry on a conversation with people. I spoke with an Appalachian dialect and speech pattern and many times used words that people did not comprehend. Strangers often asked what part of the country I came from. Therefore, I avoided speaking. How could I hold a conversation? I grew up with such sentences as: "Uh bair runned Vernon and Ver to tha edge o' them woods ova thair." "Ye hare looks like a rat's nest. Go innair 'n' git a com' 'n' I'll git 'em tangles out of ye hare fer ye." "You young'uns git out from up in under thair. Ye'll git hurt. Ye know ye ain't suppose ta play 'n air."

Even now, I can't remember whether one buys food or feed for the dogs. Do you put a comforter on your bed or do you "kiver" it with a counterpane? Is something "makeshaft" or makeshift? In Appalachia, snakes "quiled" up; they didn't coil up. We "et" berry "sonkers" for dessert. A person acted like an "eediot" at times when he or she acted silly. Someone might say something
"twict" when they said it two times. We always had good "ideals" as opposed to ideas. We "might could have" done something if we really tried. We wore "britches," not pants; only grown ups wore those. We carried food or other items in a "poke," not a bag. When we got sick we "vomicked." "Leather britches" sure tasted good when "biled" with a big chunk of fat back. A baby's "nable" cord dried up and fell off after a few weeks if the baby happened to be "mending" well and seemed "pert." We never reached for anything; we might have "retch" for it though. I tasted a hamburger and French fries for the first time when I went to work in Fairfax, Virginia. Unique to my part of the world, other people reacted strangely to such speech patterns and colloquialisms.

Perhaps, the urge to leave Appalachia came because everyone else fled and I felt left behind. I know that my small glimpses at the outside world made me crave more of the action taking place elsewhere. I wanted to see big cities and visit exotic places. I lusted after more education but felt inferior, thinking that I could never get accepted at a college or university. Besides, I didn't know how to apply. People assumed that I would enter the military and afterwards move on to a factory job or work in the construction industry. After all, that's where all of my family members worked.

But, actually, leaving Appalachia came in steps. The first step came when I enrolled in school at Teas Elementary. Only about six miles from my house, I entered a strange new world. Later travels outside the area included summer work in Fairfax, Virginia, another enlightening adventure. The Vietnam War raged in Southeast Asia and I enlisted in the Coast Guard with a buddy from high school to avoid being drafted into the army. Boston, Massachusetts became my
destination. Afterwards, I lived in Florida for a while but eventually returned to Appalachia and the mountains of Southwest Virginia.
Chapter 7
On My Own for the First Time—Public Schooling

A sunbeam shot through the window and pooled on the floor in a sunny, yellow glow by my bed. A rooster crowed distantly, its cacophonous “ur ah ur ah urrrrr” sounding across the quiet countryside, disturbing my sleep. Sheep bells sounded on the calm morning air. They pierced the dew laden stillness with their tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. Mom called from a far room, "Luther, it’s time ye got up, honey. The nurse’s comin’ to pick ye up." A warm breakfast of fried eggs, fat-back gravy, and buttered, brown biscuits awaited me in the kitchen, along with a pan of warm sudsy water and a wet wash rag.

"Now ye be a good youngn’ today," Mom said as she scrubbed my arms and legs, washed behind my ears, and scoured my face. She left my skin sticky-damp. It dried in the warm air but smelled of sweet soap. I pulled on my dingy, hand-me-down underwear and brown socks. She helped me into my clean, flowered, feed sack shirt, stitched together by her own hands. I pulled on my faded bibbed overalls and she snapped the wide galluses firmly over my shoulders. Last, I pulled on my heavy brogan shoes donated by a nephew and she tied the laces for me.

"I can’t go with ye today," she continued. "I got to stay home with Red. Ye’ll have to go on ye own. The nurse said she’d take good care of ye and make sure ye got ye shots before ye go to school this fall. Ye go down the lane there an’ wait fer the nurse by the mailbox. She’ll be along shortly. I’ll watch from up here at the house."
I walked slowly down the rocky incline. As I passed by, the dew drenched grass and weeds arched over and touched my shoes, soaking them with pollen-laden water. Red clay banks lined the lane's mouth and I found a place behind some weeds on one of the steep embankments and squatted down. A gapping hole under the fence, where the rain had washed the soil away, made it possible for me to sit in the opening with the sagging wire just inches above my head. Every now and then my heart raced as I heard the drone of an engine. A car climbed the steep hill down the road and then zoomed past me on the straight stretch of highway passing before our lane. Each time, I ducked behind the tall weeds hoping that no one would see me or stop. Eventually, the health nurse arrived. She found me hiding under the fence. "Now what are you hiding under there for?" she inquired. I didn't answer.

She helped me into the car and we drove to Sugar Grove School where the Smyth County Health Department held a clinic. The trip seemed to take a long time. Along the way she tried talking to me. "Are you excited about going to school this year?" I said nothing. I looked out the window as we wound our way up the valley. "I bet you'll have a good time. School is fun." I didn't respond. "Do you know any other boys and girls who will be going to school this year?" I looked out the window. "You have a younger brother, don't you? Will he go to school next year?" I made no reply. "I bet you're really smart." I ignored the compliment.

How could I converse with this strange woman? I hardly understood her questions. Until today I had never ventured much outside my home and Mom always went with me. Scared and nervous, I sat like a frightened rabbit on the passenger side of the car. My short legs stuck straight out on the seat. My head,
covered with bushy, uncut, platinum blond hair, curling around my ears, barely
came above the window on the car door. Unless I scooted to the edge of the
seat, I constantly looked up, watching the scenery whizzing by outside.

I remember being led by the health nurse into Sugar Grove School. The
building, big and impressive, buzzed with activity. Parents chatted, talked, and
laughed. They, along with children, nurses, and doctors crowded into the cafete-
ria of the school. I felt scared and alone and clung to the nurse’s hand. At some
point, she delivered me to the care of two high school girls. They stayed with me
all day, taking me to different stations for various examinations—ears, eyes,
nose, throat, teeth—and for a series of inoculations.

A doctor asked me to remove my clothes. I did so but modesty overcame
me. Feeling ashamed and overly conscious of my milky white skin and innocent
nakedness, I clung to my wadded up clothes and put them back on as soon as he
had looked into all my orifices. He reported that my tonsils should come out soon
since they appeared enlarged. The doctor vaccinated me against diphtheria,
pertussis, and tetanus. With a many-pronged needle, he jabbed a smallpox vac-
cine into the fleshy part of my upper right arm. It made my shoulder achy, itchy,
and red. I wanted to cry but didn’t. A few days later a hard, brown, scab ap-
peared; a sure sign of the positive effects of the medication. The smallpox scar
remains with me today.

Throughout the ordeal, the two girls tried talking to me. I refused. Around
noon, they took me to the country store located down the hill from the school and
bought me pop and candy. Then, late into the afternoon, the health nurse drove
me home in silence. She maneuvered the car up the bumpy lane to our house.
and stopped in the front yard. Mom met us at the front steps and asked, "Was he a good boy fer ye?"

"Oh yes, he was a very good boy," came the reply. "I couldn't get him to talk much though."

"No, he don't talk much a' tall," Mom said.

I disappeared into the house looking for Red, my younger brother and my only friend. Constant companions, we never left each others' sides and often involved ourselves in mischievous and impish activities. One time Ruth, an older sister, baked a cake for Sunday dinner, a not so easy task in those days. Getting the wood stove to the right temperature and keeping it there required skill. While the cake baked, and on my sister's demands, we tiptood through the house for fear the sweet confection might fall and end up with a sunken hole in its middle. If that happened, we knew that enduring the cake baker's wrath would become impossible.

The cake came out fine and she put white icing on it and placed it on an old table in the darkened back room to cool. Red and I discovered the cake sitting quietly by itself on the cluttered table, forlorn and alone, needing some attention. So, we pretended to be mice. The space under the table became our mouse hole. As we sat hidden in the shadows, we reached up and pinched little nibbles out of the corpulent helpless cake. We giggled as each of us sampled the fancy dessert, leaving a large jagged and ragged hole in its fat, rounded, white side. Furious when she found out, my sister ranted and raved and carried on something awful. She screeched and hollered over her imperfect cake made by little fingers sampling little nibbles out of its sides.
Another time Red and I went to the hen house to collect eggs. Rather than taking a bucket or basket, we stuffed the eggs in our pockets or carried them in our arms. Along the rocky lane from the hen house, I dropped one of the eggs. Knowing Mom would be angry, I covered it up by piling loose rocks over it. We took the rest of the eggs to the front porch and began lining them up on the window sill. Red crushed one of the eggs trying to get it out of his pocket, leaving a gooey yellow mess in his pants. Another one or two rolled off the window sill and landed with dull sounding splats on the hard boards.

Mom found us playing with the eggs on the front porch. Upset, she broke a thin switch from a bush growing nearby and thrashed me about the legs. I jumped up and down sobbing the whole time. But, while she switched me, Red ran away. He took out for the chicken house with Mom in pursuit. She caught him hiding under the chicken roost. Landing several blows across his legs as she led him back to the house, she said in an angry voice, "Don't ye never run away from me no more."

I dearly loved Red. We always played together and when my nephew Jimmy visited each summer from Baltimore, the three of us were inseparable. Upon my entering school, Red and I parted for the first time and I missed him. But, the next year he entered school too and we began our educational sojourn together. Our relationship soured a bit during our early years in school. The primary grade teacher at Teas Elementary School assigned me as his caretaker and he and I both resented it.

Red never liked schooling very much and dropped out in the eighth grade. He joined the great migration north out of Appalachia and found work in Fairfax, Virginia. But, being the last two born into a large family, I guess Red and I held a
special bond for each other. We see each other on occasion, especially during the summer, and reminisce about growing up in Appalachia, recalling both the good and bad times we endured as children.

Teas Elementary School

Teas Elementary School sat perched upon a low knoll, the grounds spreading out around it like a well-used, threadbare blanket. Here and there, dirty, brown, bald spots stood out. In the flat area below the low hill, the running, skipping, and jumping of many feet—the telltale signs of hopscotch, jump rope, and tag—kept the grass worn away. Thin jagged lines from numerous baseball and kick ball games left a thin trail in the sod, creating a rough diamond pattern in the middle of the flat lawn. In winter, long ribbons of shiny, slick ice sloped downward from the top of the rise. Called skating places, we children made these icy paths in the snow. Screaming with glee every time we whizzed down the hill on heavy boots and shoes during recess, we saw how far we could slide after taking a "runny-go."

A grove of tall locust trees sprouted on the left side of the school. The trees kept one of the two classrooms which made up the school, the one located on that side of the building, in partial shade for much of the day. Scattered throughout the grove of thorny trees, limestone outcroppings jutted heavenward. Nimble feet, at times laden with heavy, brown, brogan shoes, at other times bare, kept the rocks worn slick and clean.

Fields surrounded the back school yard. Enclosed on three sides, cattle roamed freely in the expansive open pasture land beyond the barrier. A small white clapboard house stood across the school yard fence to the right side of the school. An old, gnarled apple tree growing near the little white house, leaned to-
ward the playground. Its heavy limbs hovered over the fence like the plump breasts of a fat hen, providing shade and a cool place to play. A large apple orchard grew to the left of the school and to the right side of a white double story farmhouse with a wide front porch. The house stood in a bend of a graved road that snaked its way past the school and sat positioned near the left entrance to the school grounds. A rushing creek bubbled and gurgled as it paralleled the dirt road on the far side. School buses arched around a small maple tree growing in the flat bottom near the edge of the school yard, picking up and discharging passengers each afternoon and morning. Outhouses sat in each corner of the back lot. The boy's toilet stood on the right; the girl's toilet stood on the left. A well worn path led to each (see Figure 12, p. 132a).

Chipped and peeling in spots, and fading to a dull gray in others, clapboard covered the exterior of the building. Two long porches with banisters stretched along the front and back of the structure. The teachers walked to the ends of these porches and rang the hand bell. Clang! Clang! Clang! It sounded across the country school yard filled with the high pitched sounds of children's voices engaged in play. At the sound of the bell, the students ceased their activities and streamed like sheep, one behind the other, into the building from recess. Heavy boots and shoes thumped and bumped on the hollow wooden steps and porch floor. Here and there someone pushed or shoved another student, or tried to break line.

Steep wooden steps zigzagged upward at either end of each porch. Double wide wooden doors marked the front and back entrances to the building. Gigantic windows took up much of the school's faded clapboard walls. Two bullet holes stood out high up in the corner of one window pane, put there in years past.
by an irate student. Angry over a reprimand, the student returned with a .22 caliber rifle to scare the teacher.

Two classrooms made up the school. One housed grades one and two; the other housed grades three and four. Single light bulbs dangled from dirty plastered ceilings over ten feet high. The light bulbs, strung on long, thin, black electric cords, swayed high above. Black-slated chalkboards hung in the front and draped one side of the two cavernous rooms. George Washington and Robert E. Lee watched over both teachers and students alike, glaring down at us from high up in the shadows on the grimy side walls. The third and fourth grade classroom came equipped with an aged, black, out-of-tune piano parked at the back of the room near the front door. A set of out-of-date World Book encyclopedias sat perched on top of the piano, the extent of the school’s library. The county bookmobile made a monthly visit during the winter.

One sink, placed in a dark narrow hallway between the two rooms, provided drinking water. The county piped it from a spring located in one of the fields surrounding the school. Students brought their own drinking cup from home. We came with fruit jars, peanut butter glasses, tin cups, and an assortment of other drinking utensils. We stored them in a dark closet near the sink.

Obviously from another era, cast iron desks with marred wooden tops and hard seats sat bolted to the floors one behind the other. Like ragged, tired soldiers scarred by years of battle, they stretched in columns from the front of each room to the back. Two students shared a desk called a “two-seater.” Each desk provided an ink well, which went unused, a slot for a pencil, and a storage area under the initialed and marred writing surface.
Oiled, wooden floors covered each classroom. Dust, soot, ashes, and smoke gathered quickly over the winter, along with the comings and goings of muddied feet. So, just before Christmas each winter and then again in early spring, the older students helped the teachers oil the floors. The teachers dismissed the lower grade classes to the school yard for recess. Dipping old mops and brooms into five gallon buckets of thick oil sent out from the school board office, students and teachers alike smeared the black, smelly mess over the old boards. The oil dried after a few hours and helped to keep the dust and dirt settled.

Metal hearths surrounded large pot-bellied stoves squatting on wide feet in the middle of each room. The metal mats kept ashes and cinders from hitting the oiled wooden surfaces. Stove pipes, held in place by thin wires, stretched toward the ceiling like metal tree limbs, disappearing into the dirty plastered rafters. We fed the stoves frequently. But, always starved for coal and wood, we never feed them enough. For, even though these metal barrels with their sprouting metal limbs glowed red hot at times, we students often sat bundled up and huddled together around the stoves to keep warm. Cold drafts crept in under each door and seeped around the gigantic windows stretching from floor to ceiling, numbing our fingers and toes.

A large room attached to the back provided a kitchen and an eating area. We dined at long wooden tables spread with oiled, red-checkered tablecloths. The cook, depending mostly on government surplus, prepared nutritious meals including beans and cornbread, tomato and rice pudding, collard greens, stewed tomatoes, stewed prunes, green beans, and yellow corn. She cooked on a heavy, black, cast iron stove. The stove voraciously gobbled coal and wood.
Another room attached to the school served as a wood shed. The county stacked coal and kindling there. Older boys, fourth graders, used an ax at the end of each day to split the kindling for early morning fires. Classroom teachers ignited the fires every morning. The boys filled each coal scuttle too. They also provided coal and kindling for the cook. When I entered fourth grade, I helped with these chores.

Performing such tasks proved simple, it being customary work at home. As part of the process, I balanced a block of dry wood on the chopping block, a second larger piece of wood. Then, taking the ax, kept stored in the corner of the wood shed behind the door, I raised it above my head. Next, I brought the ax down, exerting as much forward force as possible. The ax sunk into the dry wood with a blunted sound, cleaving it in half. Grunting with each dull thud, I repeated the process over and over, eventually splintering the block of kindling wood into smaller and smaller slivers.

Another student filled the coal scuttles. He scooped shovel full after shovel full of the black, combustible mineral into the deep buckets, his hands becoming black, the dust settling on his shoes. Stooping, I gathered the split kindling into my arms; he picked up the filled coal scuttles; then, we carried our loads into each room. Often, we switched the tasks; he split the kindling while I scooped the coal.

Two teachers taught at Teas Elementary School. Mrs. Ruth Stamper taught first and second grades and Mrs. Lucille Killgore taught third and fourth. I attended the school for six years and remember both teachers well. Together they are an important part of my life story for they serve as two of the key ingredi-
ents in shaping my life history, helping me to organize the view I have of myself today.

Still surrounded by the open fields, Teas Elementary School yet rests upon the hill. Its sightless, boarded up windows, demolished porches, and classrooms stuffed with hay are all that greet the few curious onlookers and passers-by. Mice and other vermin live where children once learned. A mobile home sits in the flat area near the maple tree. The tree grew to an enormous size. The white farm-house in the bend of the road to the left of the school entrance burned a while back. A house trailer sits parked in its place. The apple orchard died from neglect. The locust grove disappeared with the passing years. To the right of the old school, the little white house remains; but, gone is the fat apple tree that once hovered over the fence watching over noisy children at play. To be sure, happiness as well as confusion intrude upon the memories I have of myself as a young student at Teas Elementary School (see Figure 13, p. 136a).

1951 - 1957 - Teas Elementary School - The Early Years

In the fall of 1951, I started school, approximately three months after my father’s death. With butterflies in my stomach, I walked with my two twelve year old twin sisters, Barbara and June (Bobby and Billy), down the rocky lane early one morning and waited for the school bus. The big yellow vehicle arrived, laboring up the hill, the bus driver flinging open the door as it came to a halt a few feet from where we waited by the mailbox. My short legs could hardly climb the bus steps. Being crowded, we stood in the aisles as the elongated, growling machine lurched around sharp curves and then struggled up and pitched down the steep hills. It made stop after stop along Slab Town Road, picking up students whose small cluttered houses sat perched directly by the roadside, hidden in deep, dark
Figure 13 - Teas Elementary School after it closed
folds of the mountains, or rested on the sides of steep hillsides. Some students walked several miles to the main road to catch the bus. High schoolers and first graders alike crammed together on the careening vehicle. Often, older sisters held the hands of their younger siblings. Standing in the aisle just as we did, they clung to the backs of seats, and to each other, in an effort to keep from falling with each jolt, jerk, or lunge of the jam-packed school bus.

After a while, the yellow contraption eased around the curved road in front of Teas Elementary School. The bus driver waited while older children took younger brothers and sisters up the hill to the school. Bobby and Billy both went with me to my classroom. They left me in the hands of Mrs. Ruth Stamper who welcomed me along with all the other new students. Watching my sisters make their way back down the sloping lawn, I felt abandoned. I kept the yellow school bus in sight as it left the school yard and then proceeded on up the valley to Sugar Grove High School.

I can't recall what happened the first day of school but I do know that the next two years all seemed to blend together into one troubling, confusing, and lonesome period of depression for me. Afraid and unsure, I felt completely out of place. I simply sat. Day after day I waited to go home to Mom. I didn't participate in play. I watched from the steps of the school's front porch, my clothes neat, crisp, and clean, my flaxen hair curling about my ears, unmussed. Like a timid mouse, I kept quiet and silent. I wanted no one to notice me. I never cried; I never laughed. I simply moved through the motions, wanting desperately to return home to Mom.

Each afternoon, I watched intently for the long yellow carriage arriving with my sisters from Sugar Grove High School. I could see it coming from afar as it
moved down the ribbon of road between the leaning fence posts along the paved road. The school bus bounced across the steel girdered bridge near the crossroads at Teas. It entered the dirt road winding by the school and in its wake sent up billows of brown clouds. The bus turned into the school yard and stopped on the curved path. Overjoyed, my heart pounded with excitement. Home awaited me!

**Achieving School Failure**

As the year progressed, the teacher placed us into groups according to our ability for reading and math. She gave no placement tests; she simply put us where she thought we deserved to be. Each reading group took place at the back of the room where a long hard bench lined the wall underneath the tall windows. The teacher sat on the end and three or four students sat in a row beside her, their brown-shod feet dangling just above the hard wooden floor. Every now and then the teacher took a fretful or unruly student on her lap. Bright light spilled over the scholars' shoulders. The students swung their legs back and forth as they struggled over the words in their first grade primers.

When I attempted to read, I repeated every word Mrs. Stamper said.

"'Dick said, Come here, Puff.

Come and ride with Spot' " (Robinson, Monroe, and Artley, 1962, p. 10).

I repeated, "Dick said, Come here, Puff.

Come and Ride with Spot."

I looked at the pictures as I aped her every word. Removing a soiled white painting jacket, a blond haired little girl with a red bow in her hair, wearing a red dress and shiny black patent leather shoes and red anklets stood beside a sparkling new blue bicycle. Her older brother, brown haired and wearing crisp black
slacks, black sneakers, and an Argyle sweater of red and blue diamonds with a white shirt collar sticking out around the neck sat astride his bright red bicycle nearby. A black and white dog perched in the basket attached to the bicycle’s handle bars and a yellow and white kitten stood between the two children on the ground.

Fascinated, the crisp, clear, brightly colored pictures mesmerized me. The two children must be rich, I thought. They owned shiny, new bikes! They did not wear faded bibbed overalls, hand-me-down brogan shoes, or home made clothes as I did. Everything appeared clean, even the dog and cat. Had they ever used an outhouse? Did they know what ashes, wood smoke, and grime might be? Had they tasted corn bread, brown beans, stewed potatoes, or gravy and biscuits?

"'Oh, Dick, said Jane.

Puff can ride with me' " (Robinson, Monroe, and Artley, 1962, p. 11).

Mouthing each and every utterance, I dangled my legs from the high bench, ignoring the words printed in large black letters on the white pages, having no idea what the symbols meant anyway.

"Gary, pay attention now," I heard Mrs. Stamper say, momentarily interrupting her reading as she scolded another student in the group. "I'll hear you read next."

After I read, she moved on to Gary. He repeated her words the same as I did. Some students knew a few words and participated in the reading. Others, like me, comprehended nothing, except perhaps how misfitted we were for such an academic setting. We simply echoed her words.
Mrs. Stamper mostly held math instruction at the chalk board. She wrote problems in large numbers: $1 + 2 = \_\_\_ \_; \ 2 - 1 = \_\_\_ \_; \ 2 + 2 = \_\_\_ \_$. Occasionally she wrote the problems vertically, calling students to the board to work each one. She gave the answers to those who couldn't work them, emphasizing the process as she wrote the answers: "One plus two more makes three. One finger plus two more fingers makes three," she demonstrated. We worked some math problems at our seats using big black fat pencils and wide-ruled writing paper. We practiced writing our letters and names too, while the teacher wrote them on the chalkboard: A, B, C . . . , a, b, c . . . , LUTHER. These school literacy tasks meant nothing to me. They only showed my incapability. Somehow I knew them to be important but I couldn't do them. However, at the end of my first year in school I went on to the second grade.

The next year Red joined me in school. Complete opposites, the teachers noticed the contrast in our personalities immediately. Bright red hair, freckles, rambunctious, and alive, trouble dogged his every move. He constantly wiggled and never sat still. His nose dripped all the time. At home we called it his "sheep's leg." Mrs. Stamper reminded him over and over to wipe his nose and to keep it clean. He either ignored her, slurped the slick greenish-yellow slime on his shirt sleeve, or sniffed it back into his head, and continued on with his activities. Later, Mom discovered that his runny nose happened to be related to rheumatic fever. Often sickly, he missed a lot of school his first year and later spent some time in the hospital. While in the hospital I missed him immensely and went to see him whenever Mom would let me ride the work bus to town with her. As a matter of fact, some of my first trips to Marion included visiting Red in the hospital. His recuperation at home took a long time as well. Even though he couldn't
play much due to doctor’s orders, he and I still laughed and romped on his bed in the front room until Mom made us quit. Finally, Red regained his strength and returned to school.

Since I never disturbed anyone, I became Red’s caretaker in school. Mrs. Stamper assigned us to the same seat and told me I should help keep his nose clean and him out of trouble. He never listened to me anymore than he listened to her. He never backed down from a fracas and so I took notes home to Mom frequently concerning his behavior. Mrs. Stamper often used the paddle on him. His academic performance paralleled mine though; we both achieved almost nothing except school failure.

My second year in school, and Red’s first, Mom made arrangements with the health department for the removal of our tonsils, a decision based on the Health Department doctor’s previous recommendations. The county health nurse took us to Marion. Red and I spent a week in recovery before the doctor allowed Mom to bring us home. I still remember the smell of ether and how sick it made me feel. Although I don’t remember missing much school early on, I know attendance for both of us improved, especially Red’s. Since birth he had been sickly and Mom often kept him home from school because of a runny nose, a cough, or a fever.

Retained in second grade, I stayed a third year with Mrs. Stamper and Red joined me after having been passed on from first grade. I never thought much about this first retention. It just seemed to be another mystery in this confusing nightmare called schooling which continued to engulf me and make my life miserable. I did notice that some of the children I started to school with moved on and I wondered why I couldn’t go with them. But, I never thought much about
staying behind. My teacher held no conferences and sought no input from Mom. She simply reflected the retention on my report card and that summed it up. Mom never talked about my failings in school, nor did anyone else in my family. The implied message seemed to be that the teacher knew best and there would be no questioning her decision.

So, I spent another year of second grade with the same teacher and with the same success---none. The next year I finally passed into third grade. But I still did not know how to read or work simple math problems. I couldn't even write my name. A third grade report card reveals straight "Fs" for all subjects except for one; I made a "G" in handwriting. Retained again, I remained in third grade for another year while Red repeated his second year in school too. Hence, without malice or forethought, my teachers critically damaged my self-esteem and the perception I had of myself as a learner (Taylor, 1991). They forced me to take five years to get through grades one, two, and three.

With maturity, I started to become more cognizant of what supposedly happened in school. I began to understand that success involved mastering certain school tasks---basically reading, writing, and arithmetic. When students performed these tasks well, according to standards established by the teacher, then he or she moved on to the next higher grade level. I also started to internalize the idea that retention meant "flunking." Considered "dumb," students who "flunked" lacked adequate progress in reading, writing, and number skills and thus could not move on with their classmates. But, what I believe now is that "one never learns simply to read or write, but to read and write within some larger discourse, and therefore within some larger set of values and beliefs" (Delpit, 1995, p. 153). Seemingly, "locked hopelessly into a lower-class status by . . .
[my own] discourse" (Delpit, 1995, p. 154), educational values and beliefs practiced at home hindered my ability to learn a set of academic discourses foreign to me.

Although I knew something to be wrong, I couldn't express my emotions. I did not have the wisdom, vocabulary, or confidence to discuss my academic failures with my family at home or with my teachers at school. Therefore, I internalized my feelings concerning my lack of success in school. I avoided mentioning to anyone that I could not read, write, or count. I kept my two troubling retentions secret, refusing to divulge them to anyone. I became very conscious of the fact that retention made me older than most of the students in my third grade class. I never discussed the age difference with anyone and avoided any conversations centering around age and failure in school. For certain, the two retentions made me feel "dumb" and ashamed. My two failures in school emphasized the idea "that an individual who is born into one discourse with one set of values may experience major conflicts when attempting to acquire another discourse with another set of values" (Delpit, 1995, p. 154).

When I got the news of my second failure, it sent me into a state of depression. I did not find out until the last day of school and I remember feeling heartbroken, abandoned, and wanting to cry when Mrs. Killgore told me she didn't think me to be ready for fourth grade. I desperately wanted to plead and beg and say that I could do the work, that I would work hard the next year, that I wasn't "dumb." I envisioned running away and quitting school. She asked me how I felt about it. I wanted to implore, "Please don't leave me behind another year!" But, I didn't know how to respond and so said nothing. Again, no conferences were sought and none held. My report card simply reported this second
failure and there would be no more discussion. I cried myself to sleep that night. Over the summer I adjusted to my second stay in third grade but I often found myself thinking about retention and being "dumb." I spent a lot of time alone and quiet, rambling through the woods amid the trees, pondering over this very troubling idea.

While in third grade for the second time, Mrs. Killgore, for some sudden reason, after almost two years of trying, decided that she could teach me to read and work math problems. She began by showing me how to do simple arithmetic using a manipulative. She brought a wooden "Playskool, Cobblers Bench" from home and demonstrated how to add and subtract by pushing the wooden dowels through the holes while all the time asking me questions.

"If I push one peg through, how many do I have left?"

She helped me count, "One, two, three, four, five."

"If there are five pegs, one in each hole, and I add one more, how many pegs are there altogether?"

"One, two, three, four, five, six," we counted together.

We did these exercises over and over. I believe that because of that one simple act of kindness and a bit of attention, I somehow gained the confidence I needed to try and learn more. I figured out how to do more simple math problems and felt quite proud when I got the correct answers but discouraged when I got them wrong. Finally, addition and subtraction began to make sense. Later I moved on to multiplication and division and found it difficult. Never learning my multiplication tables, Mrs. Killgore demanded that I do so by the end of fourth grade. I struggled over the number facts day after day. Eventually, I memorized them all but it took many months, many tears, and many missed recesses.
My report card for my second year in third grade reveals that the teacher's judgment about me as a learner changed. I improved, making a "G" in every subject. "G" meant "good!" Relieved, I passed on to the fourth grade. Due to my age, I suspect the move occurred as a social promotion, not an academic one. Thereafter, I remember constantly being worried about grades, about being considered "dumb," and always wondering if I would "flunk" again. As I made my way through school, "flunking" became a constant worry, even after I started to succeed. In essence, due to such early academic failure, I never developed the ability to trust in myself or those around me, especially those in the mandatory, school setting into which I was forced to participate year after year.

Miraculously, I began to read at home by myself one bleak winter afternoon while snuggled in an old dirty arm chair. The chair's well-worn, slick, and soiled upholstery, an aqua color at one time, had faded over the years. It had became threadbare, dusty, and ragged. The worn out overstuffed chair sat behind the tin heater in our dimly lit front room. Springs, cotton batting, and stiff, black, hog’s hair poked out of it in all directions. It being the only easy chair in the house, Mom saved the worn out piece of furniture, restuffing it with old rags attempting to make it comfortable once again. One time a rat crawled into the dirty rags under the collapsed cushion and died. Its putrid smell filled the house as the heater got hot. Mom finally located the festering carcass and carried the rotting mess outside on the end of the poker.

Due to inclement weather---howling winds, heavy snow, and slick roads---schools closed for several days. That cold winter afternoon, I decided to try reading on my own and began to laboriously sound out the words in a well worn Days and Deeds (Gray & Arbuthnot, 1951) reader. I remember the story well.
Older brothers and sisters often read it to me. One of my favorites, it dealt with an Indian caught in a blizzard. The story, "Rules or No Rules" by Gertrude Robinson, begins "'One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Six! Seven! Eight!'" (p. 61). "Uh on-e, t-o-w, uh, th-thr-ee, fo-r," I stammered. Suddenly, the words began to make sense to me! "Those were the words for numbers!" I thought.

Upon reflection, I think it strange that Mrs. Killgore gave me help with math and for some reason my success with numbers gave me the incentive to try reading. Even more bizarre, the story began with the words for numbers. Slowly, as if by magic, this mysterious, complex, and puzzling riddle called reading loomed out of the darkness and began to take shape for me. I wrestled with this troubling monster day after day. Although my comprehension remained weak for years, I still read everything I could, at times not understanding the sentences. But, I kept going back over the words until I thought I knew what they said.

Needless to say, my reading skills developed slowly and it took hours it seemed just to read a few pages. But, I did not quit. I could sound out the words and that's what reading meant to me. I witnessed other children reading and that's all they appeared to do, just sound out the words. It never dawned on me that real reading included understanding and interpreting messages picked up by the brain through the squiggles written on the page. I look at words today and still wonder: Now why is it that such and such a word is said and spelled as it is, and why, and who, decided that it should be pronounced that way, and have the meaning it does?

Indeed, Mrs. Killgore exhibited a kind and caring attitude in her approach to teaching. She had a sense of humor and laughed with us on many occasions. She worried about our keeping warm in the winter and many times huddled with
us around the pot bellied stove sitting in the middle of the classroom while she taught. She showed us how to play kick ball and often joined us in such games, as well as tag and jump rope. She helped us perform plays. I remember once in fourth grade playing the part of the witch in "Hansel and Gretel." She encouraged each of us to participate in the art and singing festival sponsored by the county each spring. Christmas came alive in her classroom. We made multicolored paper chains and molded aluminum foil around sycamore balls for the Christmas tree. We painted Christmas pictures, sang Christmas songs, and decorated pine cones with glitter and paint.

Years later, after I became the principal of an elementary school, I ran into Mrs. Killgore at a Southern Association meeting at Emory and Henry College. I hardly recognized her. She had aged considerably. She sat at the back of the room having been invited as a retired guest consultant for the conference. Mrs. Killgore taught school for years in Smyth County and then retired after serving as Supervisor of Elementary Curriculum.

Near the end of the day, I approached her and said, "Mrs. Killgore, do you remember me?"

"Aren't you John?" she said.

"No, I'm Luther Kirk."

"Oh," she said, "I remember you now."

We chatted for a while about the past, about families, about careers, and about the changes occurring with the passage of time. I always meant to write her a letter expressing my gratitude for the attention she gave me more than forty years ago. Now, I had my chance to tell her in person. I related my grateful story and told her that I felt I owed much of my successes in life to her.
After I finished my story, she looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, "You know, I came to Teas Elementary School fresh out of college with a two-year degree. I had no idea what I was doing."

**Life at Teas Elementary School**

Life at Teas Elementary School included many good times, especially after I began to experience a few successes. The good times started my second year in third grade when a period of positive change for me began to take place. I started to play baseball, kick ball, tag, jump rope and other games, and made several friends. I enjoyed school for the first time and got involved in a bit of mischief (see Figure 14, p. 148a). On several different occasions, Mrs. Killgore called me to the front of the room, told me to lean over her desk, and delivered several whacks with her wide paddle. One such paddling occurred after another boy and I played "keep away" with a girl's knit cap. Tossing it about the room, so that she couldn't catch it, the child's hat became tattered, torn, and soiled. In tears, she went to Mrs. Killgore who brought out her paddle.

You may think it strange that I consider the paddlings as being part of the good times but I believe they signaled a change in my withdrawn behavior. The shell encasing me for almost three years had finally begun to crack. I started to take on the outward appearance at least of what educators of the day might consider a normal student. I laughed, played, bickered, and got into a bit of mischief.

Another good part of my schooling at Teas Elementary included the art and singing festival held by the county each year in Marion. Mrs. Killgore set up an easel and allowed each child to paint a picture using many colored tempera paints. Occasionally, she selected one or two of my paintings to be displayed on the day of the festival. Overjoyed at being selected, I began to think of myself as
Figure 14 - Luther Kirk - third grade
perhaps having some artistic ability. Also, the whole school practiced one or two songs to be sung for singing competitions held in Marion. We learned the words to: "Go Tell Aunt Rhody," "Clouds," "The Mocking Bird Song," "The Little Bird's Ball," "My Grandfather's Clock," and many more. I sang by ear and remembered the tunes and words to all of these songs. Years later I crooned them to my own children. They grew to love them just as much as I had done so many years before.

A school bus picked all singers and artists up one Saturday morning in early spring and drove us to Marion. There we performed on the big stage at Marion High School before a packed audience. Made up of children, teachers, and a few parents, our audience traveled from small communities tucked away in mountain hollows---Landsdown, Adwolf, Riverside, Hyter's Gap, Tannersville, and Rich Valley---the locations of other little country schools scattered throughout the county. So proud, we stood upon that stage, dressed in our finest clothes, and sang loud and clear, desperately trying to please Mrs. Killgore with our performance. Afterwards, we looked at the many art projects displayed in the school's large cafeteria, especially our own, and marveled at the size of Marion High School with its many classrooms, wide halls, tiled bath rooms, and gigantic auditorium.

While attending Teas Elementary School I got involved in more than a few mischievous incidents. The following narrative is a true story concerning one of those scenarios.

Prunes

Teas Elementary School boasted its share of odd characters with Avery being one of the oddest. Husky and big for his age, he
loved to eat. Avery always carried a lunch box to school crammed full of homemade foods such as pinto beans stuffed into a glass jar, a slab of cold corn bread, or butter and jelly biscuits wrapped in waxed paper.

I don't think the fact that he carried such hefty lunches to school made him seem any odder than the other children. Many students brought such lunches. But, Avery loved prunes. Even though he brought his lunch, he thought the government surplus prunes served in the cafeteria to be delicious. When they were on the menu, he moved from table to table begging them from the other students' plates. His penchant for prunes made him the brunt of many jokes; we called him "Prunes."

When the floors of the school needed an oiling, older students helped out. Often, the teachers expected everything to be cleaned, including the desks. We emptied them and discarded any broken pencils, chewed erasers, crumpled papers, or dull and broken crayons not wanted. The oilings became whole-day projects while reading, writing, and arithmetic came to a halt.

One spring day, Mrs. Stamper asked Mrs. Killgore if Patsy Altman and I, along with a few other students, could help the younger children in her classroom clean their desks in preparation for an oiling. During the cleaning, a dirty pair of underwear appeared on the floor at the front of the room in a pile of dirt, crumpled papers, pencil nubs, and other debris. No one saw which desk they fell from but Ms. Stamper spied them. She took the poker leaning
in the corner nearby and picked them up on the end of it. Thrusting the poker forward, the dirty drawers dangling lifelessly from the end, she asked in a sharp, loud, voice, "Whose are these?"

From the back of the room came the answer, "They're Carolyn Hoag's."

"Now Danny Tolison, just how do you know they're Carolyn Hoag's?" Mrs. Stamper responded in disbelief, one hand akimbo, the other still clutching the iron poker.

"Because I seen her twirlin' 'em on her fanger and a sangin' to herself when she come from the outhouse the other day."

Titters and giggling broke out about the room. Carolyn Hoag, unmoved, and seemingly lost in her own thoughts, mumbled nonchalantly, "They ain't mine."

"Well if they are yours, take them home and have your momma wash them. They look perfectly good to me."

Without anymore ado, Mrs. Stamper tossed the dirty pair of drawers into the coal scuttle sitting near the stove and bustled about the room continuing with the task of getting the floors ready for oiling.

The next day, late in the afternoon, Patsy and I cleaned the chalkboards for Ms. Stamper while she and Ms. Killgore watched the other children playing outside, waiting for the last bus to arrive. We had a grand old time chasing each other around the room, slinging water everywhere, and dusting the erasers on each others' heads. Suddenly, we noticed Prunes's lunch box sitting on one of
the desks at the back of the room. We looked at each other and without saying a word, Patsy walked to the coal scuttle sitting near the stove. The dirty panties still lay there. She took the poker from the corner and hoisted the soiled underwear onto the end. She marched to the back of the room with the poker thrust out straight before her, the lifeless, dirty panties hanging limp from the end. While I unlatched the catches and held the lid open, she plopped the pair of dirty underwear into the tin box amid the lunch scraps. I quickly closed the lid and snapped it shut. We left it just as we had found it.

As the last bus arrived Prunes came into the room looking for his lunch box. He picked it up and ran to meet the bus. Patsy and I hooted and hollered like idiots over our nasty trick. When Prunes got off at his stop on Slab Town Road, we watched as he started the long walk up the path to his house situated in the woods on the side of a mountain. He began swinging his lunch box back and forth, making the empty glass jar and other scraps clatter and bang against the tin sides. As the bus lumbered off, leaving Prunes behind, we howled with glee.

Patsy and I never stopped to consider what might happen when Prunes got home and his mother discovered the dirty pair of drawers hidden in his lunch box. We didn't have enough foresight to appraise the wrath that Mrs. Stamper might bestow upon us if she ever found out about such shenanigans. Using the paddle
didn’t bother her at all. We didn’t worry over what our parents would do or say if they discovered our silly joke.

In the end, nothing ever happened; the whole trick just fizzled. I guess Patsy and I ended up being the odd characters in this story. But, I still wonder what Avery’s mother thought when she opened his lunch box that evening and found Carolyn Hoag’s dirty underwear among the crumpled waxed paper, corn bread crumbs, dirty pinto bean jar, and half eaten jelly biscuits.

Life at Home

Indeed, during my early years at Teas Elementary School, we lived in abject poverty at home. After Dad’s death, no money came into the house except what older bothers and sisters, or other relatives, sent. It took several years for Mom to start drawing a Social Security check from Dad’s retirement account. Years later she told us that her entire check came to about forty dollars a month. Our food came from the garden and farm. She sewed most of our clothes, or we depended on hand-me-downs. She saved the soles from old shoes and repaired ours by whittling down the leather and tacking it to the soles of our worn out shoes. When our hair got too long, Mom cut it. Many times I went to school with gaps about my ears and looking as though she had placed a bowl over my head and then lopped the hair off as it protruded from underneath the bowl’s edges. Mom opened a credit account at the community store near our house and went deep into debt buying staples she couldn’t raise. Two of my siblings became so ill that they required hospitalization. Mounting hospital bills threw her deeper into debt.
I don't remember ever going hungry but the threat of hunger always persisted. For example, often, especially near the end of the month, dinner included only fried corn cakes with home made syrup drizzled over them and a glass of milk. Mom made the syrup by boiling sugar and water together in her big iron skillet. Other foods included beans, potatoes, and cornbread and any canned goods from the cellar.

Once I remember, on a very cold winter evening, Mom baked a pone of corn bread and stewed a pot of potatoes with fatback for our evening meal. While carrying the pot of potatoes to the table, my sister dropped it in the middle of the kitchen floor. The potatoes splattered in all directions sending the scalding steam billowing upward. Annoyed, Mom yelled, "Now, I don't know what you'll eat fer supper!" My sister, in tears, fled into the front room. But, we still ate the potatoes that night. Mom scraped them off the dirty floor and rewashed and reheated them.

One year I took so many huckleberry biscuits to school that I never wanted to see another huckleberry. Mom didn't have money to buy our lunches and so we often brought biscuits or sandwiches from home. Month after month it seemed, I carried huckleberry jam sandwiches in my lunch box. Once, I took only the scraps from the previous day. I don't know whether Mom forgot to pack my lunch or whether she didn't have anything to pack. But, I know I sat and ate the pieces from my stale huckleberry jam sandwich hoping that no one would notice.

In fourth grade, Mrs. Killgore made arrangements for me to work in the cafeteria so that I could eat for free. Released from class, I helped the cook set the table and afterwards swept the floors and washed the heavy oiled, red-
checkered tablecloths. I also emptied the garbage and brought in coal and kindling.

I watched every afternoon as other students enjoyed their ice cream or milk during snack time. Once, Mrs. Killgore took pity upon me and bought me a frozen treat. She called me to her side and asked if I would like a fudge sickle. Delighted, I said yes. She put a nickel in the till and told me to get the ice cream from the freezer at the front of the classroom. But, my delight quickly turned sour. Another student teased me about not having enough money to buy the ice cream. He accused me of begging the teacher for ice cream money. His accusations wounded my pride and left me frustrated and in tears. I threw the half eaten ice cream bar at him, while he giggled and laughed the whole time.

Students who brought permission notes and had money walked down the dusty road to the country store. After lunch, long streams of children left the school to purchase taffy, BB Bats, Sugar Daddies, bubble gum, and many other candies. Once, a student stole another child's candy money. The thief walked to the store and purchased a whole bag of "whistle candy." Shaped like a whistle and attached to a stick, the "whistle candy" made a shrill sound when one blew on the pipe-shaped treat. Sharing his bounty with me, I stuffed the loot into the top pocket of my bibbed overalls. I had no idea that he had stolen the money for such a purchase. But, the money came up missing and after much interrogation, the culprit confessed. However, in his confession he relayed how I helped him steal the money to buy the candy. Mrs. Stamper, being in charge of the investigation, asked to search my pockets. Stunned, she found the candy and in a voice dripping with sarcasm, said "Luther Kirk, I'm surprised and ashamed of
you." She turned on her heel and left, leaving me crushed. Never having been accused of stealing anything in my young life, I sat silent and red, saying nothing.

After many years in operation, the county school board closed Teas Elementary School. They barred its doors the year I entered fifth grade. Due to consolidation programs taking place in Smyth County, the school board decided to house all grade levels in my part of the county, approximately five hundred students, first through the eleventh, at Sugar Grove School. In those days no kindergartens or twelfth grades existed in the Smyth County Public School system. However, both came into being with time.

While the county added a new wing to Sugar Grove School, they built another two roomed school down the hill from the construction site as temporary quarters. The entire student body from Teas Elementary School moved there. I often wondered why they chose to build the makeshift school as they did. Potbelly stoves still sat in each classroom and tall windows stretched from floor to ceiling letting the light spill onto hard, wooden floors. We traveled to the main building to use the bathroom and to eat lunch. Perhaps the school board considered mobile units too expensive for classrooms. Or, maybe they had never heard of such facilities. At any rate, I progressed through fifth grade in these makeshift quarters. The next year they demolished the two classrooms and housed all students in the main building.

1957 - 1960 - Sugar Grove School - The Middle Years

Despite being academically slow and terribly aware of my advancing age, I remember fifth grade as being a particularly good year. I liked my teacher and seemed to do well according to my elementary school records. I made "As" and "Bs" in all subjects except for music. In that subject alone I made a "C." How-
ever, math still seemed to be particularly difficult, especially word problems. Low comprehension skills didn't help. Struggling over the words, trying to comprehend their meaning, deciphering their content, deciding what operation, or operations, to use, and then using numbers to find the answers proved too complicated and vexing. They often reduced me to tears. Many times at home while trying to work such problems, I hurled the book across the room in frustration. I didn't understand them and no one could help me.

Having traveled widely, my fifth grade teacher brought to school a book of national parks. I looked at page after page of beauty. She allowed me to bring the book home and I poured over the pages and marveled at the spectacular scenery found in Bryce Canyon-Zion and Arches-Canyonlands National Parks in the state of Utah. Vicariously I visited both the Grand Canyon and Petrified Forest National Parks found in Arizona, as well as the Saguaro National Monument located in the same state. In my mind I traveled to Yellowstone-Grand Teton National Parks in Wyoming. I studied carefully numerous other national parks and monuments and dreamed of visiting them some day. Many years later, I did.

My fifth grade teacher also seemed to be a bit eccentric. She carried her alarm clock back and forth from home. Perhaps she did this because her classroom had no timepiece. But, such a practice proved too tempting for a group of unruly fifth graders. One morning she came to school upset and in tears. It seems that someone had tampered with the alarm on her clock, setting it for four in the morning. When it sounded, she and her husband arose, got dressed, and he started for the barn to milk the cows after she fixed his breakfast. On this very early frosty morning, he recognized something amiss half way to the barn. It re-
mained pitch black outside, the moon still rode high in the sky, and the cows had not gathered in from the fields as usual.

Once, with two high school girls acting as substitutes. (for some reason the county didn't hire a substitute that day) the whole class got out of control. While chasing each other around the hot stove sitting in the corner, one of the girls hit her head on the stove pipe, knocking it off its foundation. In a panic the two high school girls replaced the hot stove pipe by using old cleaning rags. A teacher from the adjoining classroom rushed in to see what might be creating all the noise and confusion. She chastised us severely for such recklessness and misbehavior. I'm surprised the whole building didn't burn down. However, this near fatal mishap got our attention and we settled down.

Sixth grade proved to be a good year as well. Young and pretty, our beginning teacher took control of her first class. I still find it uncanny that this new teacher happened to be the niece of the janitor at Riner Elementary School where I eventually would do my student teaching and then teach for eleven years. My sixth grade teacher seemed to like me. She discovered a bit of artistic talent hidden somewhere deep within and encouraged it. For an art project, she asked me to draw the outline of a body on a large sheet of poster board and to sketch in the internal organs. Then, using different colored pieces of clay I molded the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, gall bladder, large intestine, small intestines, and pancreas into shapes and placed them on the model, labeling each one. The project went to the art and singing festival in Marion. Once again, I felt proud of another artistic accomplishment. After the festival ended, I brought the project home and kept it for many years thereafter.
During sixth grade, I discovered a series of books written by Joseph A. Altsheler (1934). Called *The Young Trailers*, the books dealt with a group of frontiersmen who moved into the Kentucky wilderness and helped the settlers fight the Indians. Invincible, the main character and his cohorts, all hunters, got involved in skirmish after skirmish. I poured over the books, reading many of them two or three times.

Imagine my surprise when, just recently, I found them housed away at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University library in the juvenile section. Elated, I pulled the first book in the series from the shelf, flipped through the pages, and began to read:

Hour after hour the silent file trod swiftly on into the northwest, no one speaking, their footfalls making no sound on the soft earth.

The moonlight deepened again, and veiled the trunks and branches in ghostly silver or gray. By and by it grew darker and then out of the blackness came the first shoot of dawn. (Altsheler, 1934, p. 200)

The reading thrilled me again, but for another reason. I realized as I re-read this passage after thirty years that this series of books probably helped to improve my reading and writing more than any other books I have read before or since. For the first time, I had found something to read which interested me. The author created bold, well developed characters. He described sweeping and detailed settings—the Kentucky frontier. He made his simple plots of danger come alive and easy to follow. Multiple themes of adventure, hard work, and exploration became obvious. His writing style created many moods. The rising action came to an exciting climax time after time. Furthermore, I had made the selec-
tion; no teacher had been involved. Today I wonder: Would learning to read have been less painful for me if teachers had bothered to find out what interested and fascinated me and then developed a personalized reading program based on those interests?

I remember seventh grade as being extremely unpleasant. Being older, pubescence began in earnest and I grew extremely conscious of my changing but troubling appearance. My voice began to crack and pimples and blackheads began to appear. Body odor became a problem. With no bathroom at home and no one to talk to me about natural hormonal changes, personal hygiene became another nightmare. Other students noticed these changes too and made snide comments about body odor and skunks. I withdrew and stayed by myself for much of the time, seldom speaking to anyone except for the one or two acquaintances I knew. I avoided any conversations centering around age, retention, and puberty. Suffice it to say, I did not languish alone. A few other students had been held back too. The onslaught of puberty became just as obvious and uncomfortable for Henry, Steve, and Rick. They suffered in their own personal ways.

Indeed, I became slightly rebellious my seventh grade year. My negative attitude developed as an extension of who I believed myself to be at the time—a misfit, a nobody. Not just a poor student, I viewed myself as a "dumb" one too. Being older than most of the other pupils troubled me; puberty frightened me; poverty surrounded me; and, materialistically I felt deprived. I suffered from a poor self image and a devastated ego. I held no assurances that I would not be retained again. Becoming more and more aware of these drawbacks, I longed to be normal, the correct age, popular, and well liked. I hated being poor.
Consequently, as a way of rebelling, I got into several fights. One such fight occurred in the cafeteria. A friend and I got mad at each other (I don't remember why) and began wrestling in the middle of the dinner table. Our faces red and flushed, we rolled around punching and kicking. We wrapped our arms around each other's necks trying to get the upper hand. The food trays scattered in all directions along with the astonished students. Neither of us won the fight for the teacher entered the room and in a rage sent both of us packing to the principal's office. He bent us across his desk and flailed our backsides with his thick, slick, and shiny paddle drilled full of holes.

Another incident occurred in blatant defiance. The stage area of the cafeteria became the seventh grader's favorite hang out, especially the wings area. We chased each other in and out of the long curtains hanging from supports high up in the shadows. Boys and girls who imagined themselves to be dating went there for privacy. After the teachers discovered our favorite place, they declared the stage area off limits. But, that did not deter me and several other students from secretly slipping away from recess and hiding there. Again, our seventh grade teacher asked us to make our way to the principal's office where he brought out his well-worn "board of education" as he called it.

Once a substitute teacher asked me and two other students, Ida and Henry, to stop giggling and disrupting the whole class. We ignored her request and continued our annoying behavior. Finally, she asked each of us to come to the front of the room and stretch forth one of our hands, palm up. Withdrawing a thin, shellacked, wooden ruler from her desk, she had the other two students in tears as she administered a blow or two across their tender palms. However, I refused to cry. Instead I kept a defiant grin on my face. Without speaking, she
grinned back and delivered whack after painful whack to my open hand. Her face turned red; her flailing hand grew tired. Finally, she stopped and I returned to my seat still grinning, my determined Appalachian pride, often "stronger than desire or need," (Jones, 1994, p. 68) still intact. My hand turned a crimson red and overnight my palm bruised a purplish-blue. For a few days afterwards, my fingers felt numb and tender and I couldn't use them.

Finally, seventh grade slipped away. On the whole, the middle school years from 1957 to 1960 included both happy as well as troubling times. In retrospect, perhaps they could have been wonderful. My difficulties with puberty were not unique to me alone. All teenagers suffer through such anxieties. But, I had no one to turn to. A male role model did not live in my home. There were no guidance counselors. Sex education did not exist. Furthermore, I had lost the ability to trust; I lived with the fear of failure; and, confusion became my constant companion. But, relieved, I passed into the eighth grade and began changing classes as a high school student.

**1960 - 1965 - Sugar Grove School - The High School Years**

Beginning in 1960, during my first year as a high school student, having turned fifteen, I began to travel outside my familiar Appalachian environment for summer work in Fairfax, Virginia. After school ended each spring, my older brother Paul either drove down home to pick me up or I rode the train or bus north. He found me a job in a sheet metal shop where he worked. I toiled as a laborer cutting sheets of metal, which came in a variety of gages, into many sizes for different draftsmen. They drew layouts and then designed and constructed various pieces of duct work for air conditioning units using the metal sheets.
Anxiety and nervousness flooded over me the first summer Paul came to pick me up. It would be my first summer away from home and I didn’t know what to expect. Using Route 11 for most of the way, we drove for about ten hours passing through small towns congested with cars and trucks. We seldom used Interstate 81, it being under construction at the time. But, in spots, we entered this modern thoroughfare and zoomed along at a good clip. As we came nearer to northern Virginia, the mountains disappeared behind us and the landscape spread out into flat plains and rolling hills. The road stretched into the distance disappearing and reappearing as it dipped into low places and then crested rounded hilltops. As I sat in the back of the car, I remember thinking the sky looked strange. Blue and green colors meshed together, blending on the horizon into a light greenish blue. Seldom venturing into places without high mountains and sharp ridges, this obvious contrast between earth and sky seemed astonishingly different.

I stayed with my brother over the summer and earned around fifty dollars a week. Hoarding every penny, I thought myself to be rich. I knew nothing about banking and so after cashing each check, which I learned how to do, I kept all my money in bills. I resented the bank charging fifty cents for handling the check because I didn’t have a checking account with them. My older sister, also living in northern Virginia at the time, encouraged me to save my earnings. At the end of summer, I returned home bringing most of my money with me and buying school books, a few clothes, and other items. One year for example I bought an old television set from one of the neighbors. Another time I had all of the cavities in my decaying teeth filled. I also kept some of my money secretly socked away in a
dresser drawer at home. Eventually, I did open a checking account at the bank in Marion and stashed away what little money I managed to save.

Working in Fairfax proved to be an enlightening and rewarding experience. I saw and did things never envisioned before. I ate different foods such as hamburgers and French fries for the first time. On occasion I rode the bus to Baltimore to see two older sisters who lived there and visited Washington, D. C. with another sister who lived in Manassas. The sweltering summers of the area and the overcrowded conditions proved to be something new to me. Needless to say, they required adjustments. Often homesick, I longed for the cool mountain breezes and the carefree summers of far Southwest Virginia. I worked in Fairfax for four years but each year, right before school started, I returned to the mountains happy to be going home.

Eighth and ninth grades passed rather quietly and uneventful. I mostly became a recluse, staying by myself. I maintained a few close friendships, especially from my elementary school days at Teas. Self conscious, unsure, distrusting, and backwards, I avoided most other students, especially older high school boys. On several occasions they threatened to beat me up and it scared me. I never used the bathrooms at school, always waiting until I got home. Many days I left the school bus and climbed up the rocky lane to our house in a hurry, visiting the outhouse first.

During lunch hour for most of my eighth grade year, I ate lunch alone and, after leaving the cafeteria, I found myself a quiet spot in one of the empty classrooms, staying hidden away from the school bullies. In hiding from my adversaries I belittled myself and hated it but I simply lacked the strength, sureness, courage, and social skills to face their comments and “tough guy” attitudes day after
day. I often fantasized about being strong enough to beat my adversaries to a pulp. Sadly, I wished for a gun or knife to carry with me. Today, although I don't agree with them, I can identify with those students who choose to bring guns and knives to school for protection.

Academically, I seemed to do fine. Old school records show mostly "As," "Bs," and "Cs." In a bold move on my part, I became an inactive member of the Science Club. But, math and reading still did not come easy. Also, I despised physical education and dreaded taking the subject each year. Not being very sports minded, I had to contend with well developed athletes. Good at sports, they expected me to be the same, or so I envisioned. The school sponsored basketball and baseball for the boys and basketball for the girls. I cringed at the thought of playing team sports. Always one of the last to be selected, I became physically ill and at times threw up when team leaders chose sides. Often I sat on the sidelines and feigned illness to keep from participating. As soon as my schedule allowed, I quit taking physical education classes altogether.

As I struggled through the grades, some teachers fostered my poor self image. In tenth grade I recall that my math teacher sent me, along with two or three other poor math students, to the chalk board day after day to work algebra equations. Knowing we didn't understand them, he humiliated us before the whole class anyway. He sat with his feet propped upon his desk and a sarcastic grin plastered to his face.

I hated math and I hated the teacher but graduation meant taking algebra and passing it. The algebra class met in the basement of the school. I dreaded descending into this dark and gloomy abyss each day. I entered the dank and musty room intimidated, but afterwards left relieved. Before class began, I looked
at the floor or nervously talked to the people seated around me. My heart raced. I got a tightness in my chest. My stomach fluttered with nervousness. I couldn't keep from thinking, "I know he'll call on me. He does almost every day. Maybe he won't today." But once again, "Pat, Henry, Nellie, Luther, I want ya'll to come to the board and work problems one, two, three, and four. They were part of last night's homework and ya'll should know how to work them."

Feeling uncomfortable, nervous, and intimidated, I picked up my book and plodded to the chalk board and wrote: \(7(4x) + 3(x + 2)\). I stared at the jumble of numbers, letters, and symbols and made some feeble attempts at trying to solve the equation, knowing that I would get it wrong. I always got the problems wrong. The chalk made a dull, scraping sound as I scratched out numbers hoping they might work. I tried not to pay attention to the other students beside me. I used the side of my hand as an eraser and started over time after time.

The teacher made no suggestions; he offered no help. The minutes dragged by. Embarrassed, I waited for him to tell me that I had gotten the problem wrong. I wanted to get the humiliation over with and return to my seat. I heard whispers and giggling behind my back and knew ridicule when I heard it. I envisioned every student in the room laughing at me and probably thinking: How dumb can anybody be?

"That's not right," the teacher announced loudly. To make the situation even more embarrassing he called another student to the board to help me. "Dave, can you come up here and help him work the problem?" He made some nasty comment as usual. "Don't you know how to work that problem? If you would do your homework, it might help." He had no idea and didn't care how hard I struggled over the problems in the book every night. No one at home even
knew what algebra was. They couldn't help me. He never explained how to work any of the problems before he made the assignment. He didn't care that I had no idea how to solve the equation. To him I was just another poor, dumb hick who would eventually drop out of school.

The class usually ended when he started talking about the girl's basketball game which he had coached the night before. Sometimes he talked about hunting or fishing for the whole math period. I remember one time he explained how to keep pears edible over the winter by wrapping them in toilet paper and then storing them in a cool, dry place. I welcomed such diversions for they allowed me to escape humiliation for the moment. But, needless to say, I ended up with a lifetime math phobia.

In the fall of my tenth grade year an old friend from Teas Elementary School and I decided to take a hike. President John F. Kennedy, alarmed over the sad state of America's youth relating to physical fitness, encouraged all people to exercise more. He said that they should include hiking as part of their physical fitness routines and suggested that people take fifty mile walks. We decided to better that and walk one hundred miles.

Hitching a ride to town after school on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, and in a cold drizzle, we began our trek towards Roanoke, Virginia on state Route 11. At spots, we walked along Interstate 81. But walking the high-speed roadway proved too risky. A state trooper stopped us at one point and asked for some identification. He inquired as to our final destination and questioned our walking along the interstate. We convinced him of our involvement in President Kennedy's physical fitness program and showed him our social security cards, the
only remote form of identification which we possessed. Finally, he let us go but informed us that for safety reasons pedestrians were banned from Interstate 81.

Just as night began to fall, we stopped at a roadside restaurant near Rural Retreat, Virginia and bought a sandwich and something to drink. Continuing on, we took shelter from the constant drizzle and rested in a tangled pine grove overlooking the golf course at Wytheville, Virginia. Miserable from the damp and cold, we warmed ourselves in a Laundromat near the edge of the same town. As we walked through the cold, damp, and dark, our limbs began to stiffen. Increasingly, our sore muscles forced us to rest for longer periods of time as we seated ourselves on the guard rails by the roadside. We owned no hiking boots but walked in our street shoes. Huge blisters bubbled up on the balls of our feet. We hobbled along all night, finally making it to Dublin, Virginia late into the evening of the second day.

At a gas station we rested and bought a snack. My traveling partner made a collect, long distance phone call to one of our favorite teachers who then lived in Grayson County. Knowing of our plans for the trip, she predicted that we would never make it to Roanoke and wanted us to call her collect from wherever we stopped. She proved to be right. After limping along for perhaps fifty miles, we caught the Greyhound bus home, abandoning our foolish adventure at Dublin. Upon arriving back in Marion, we trudged another twelve miles across the mountain to our homes. I slept for two days and ended up with sores on my feet, aching muscles, stiff legs, and a worn out pair of shoes.

The friend involved in this ill planned excursion two years later wrote the following passage in my senior yearbook:
Luke,

Being as I can't write straight or think that way either, I will merely say, "May the glow of a thousand fireflies brighten your path forever."

If you wake up with sore feet you've been dreaming of our unlucky trek to "Roanoke." Stay outa [sic] brair [sic] patches and from behind theater walls. Don't walk across any mountains at nightfall when its snowing. And, if you ever get to the top, look me up, I'll be there. (But don't bring your wife, I'll be still alergic [sic] to females!)

Rob. C. McKinley

A bit of coincidence surrounds the teacher involved in this adventure, the one he called from Dublin. This educator eventually moved to Montgomery County, Virginia and taught sixth grade at Auburn High and Middle School, next door to Riner Elementary, my destined place of employment. As a student teacher seeking a double endorsement in English and elementary school teaching, I did a duel placement at Auburn High and Middle School and Riner Elementary. I thought I recognized her voice in the teacher's lounge my first day at the high school. Curious, I thrust my head through the door and exclaimed, "Mrs. Green! Somebody told me you were dead!"

"No," she said, "I'm afraid I'm still alive and well."

We held a grand reunion recalling old times.

I remember grades eleven and twelve to be filled with fun and many activities. Also, something I never thought possible happened. I finally reached the top of the pecking order and my attitude towards school changed dramatically. I
still felt uncomfortable concerning my age and my two retentions. But, as my classmates grew older, age didn't seem to be such an issue. Even so, I avoided talking about failing and still harbored the fear that graduation for me may not materialize. I joined the Spanish Club, served as an artist on the school newspaper, "Maple Murmurs," and helped advertise for the junior play, doing art work there too. Our class started selling magazines and other items in an effort to raise money for a senior trip to Washington, D. C. Each rising senior class started fund raisers the year before since the trip to Washington involved a considerable amount of money.

The end of my junior year finally arrived. Each junior class participated in the retiring senior class's graduation ceremony. The junior class marched into the school's auditorium, following the graduating seniors, carrying an unlit candle. Near the end of the ceremony, the senior class president lit a candle from one on the stage and passed it to the junior class president. Afterwards, each junior class member passed before the junior class president and lit his or her candle; then, they slowly marched from the darkened auditorium. The lit candles created a long line of small, flickering, yellow glows in the dark. This ceremony, a tradition at the school, signified that the rising seniors were taking over the helm from the graduating class. Using money from my summer work in Northern Virginia, I purchased a new black suit for the occasion.

Amid all the excitement of my junior year, another incident dealt a crushing blow to my already fragile ego. A high school government and typing teacher, working as a guidance counselor, said, during our token guidance counseling session, "What do you want to do when you get out of school?"

"I really like biology and would like to teach it," I ventured aloud.
"You need to prepare for work in a factory. You could never get into college. You would never succeed," he predicted.

I recall leaving his crowded office in the loft above the old stage area disappointed. I clumped down the steep, wooden stairs in a foul mood. Did his ungracious comment lodge itself in my psyche and become the driving force behind the rest of my lifetime achievements? Did that counseling session give me the courage to continue just to prove him wrong? Did his unkind remark gall my intense Appalachian pride (Barker, 1995) enough for me to covertly decide: Ain't no damned high school teacher, pulling extra duty as a guidance counselor, gonna tell me what I can or can't do with the rest of my life?

Twelfth grade finally arrived and proved to be an exciting year. I did things I never thought possible. Our class, along with the junior class, held the first prom ever at the school. We talked our senior class sponsor into letting us try this glorious event. She agreed to help us. We created a backdrop by decorating a huge bulletin board with dark paper and a large yellow moon. Red roses made from paper twined together around the moon, framing it and creating a graceful arch. Under the arched roses and across the yellow moon, and in large, silver letters using many curlicues, we printed our theme, "Moonlight and Roses."

Heretofore, such decadence had never been tolerated at the school for such frivolity, to some, appeared to be sinful and the work of the devil. To be sure, a few class members did not attend. But, I did and invited an old friend from my elementary school years to go with me. Since I did not drive, I asked a niece to chauffeur us to the prom. I bought my date a rose corsage and I wore my black suit. We had a grand time! Having watched television and been away from home enough to witness popular dances, I knew how to do some of them.
We did the Twist, the Watusi, the Jerk, the Mashed Potato, and numerous slow dances. The music blared from a borrowed record player; various students donated the records.

At year’s end, Ida, my prom date, wrote the following sentiment in my senior yearbook:

Luther,

I will not say that I wish you the best of everything, because you have it, personality, humor, and everything it takes to make a perfect [sic] person, but I will say don’t you dare forget all the fun we have had together, 7th grade, prom, and every little thing we have experienced [sic] since you have enrolled [sic] in S. G. H. S.

A friend always
Ida

Another memorable event from my senior year included our Washington trip. Raising money over a two year period through magazine sales and other fund raisers, we left on a Thursday morning. The chartered bus arrived very early at the school. Before departing, we taped huge "Sugar Grove High" banners to its sides. We traveled all the next day stopping at such places as Natural Bridge and Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s home in Charlottesville, Virginia. We stayed two nights at a motel in Alexandria, Virginia and then toured many historic sites, museums, and monuments in the city of Washington each day. I remember feeling very uncomfortable about staying in a hotel with a group of boys. Modesty forced all of us to lock the bathroom door and to never see each other undressed.

The trip also included a baseball game and a riverboat cruise down the Potomac River to Marshall Hall Amusement Park. The baseball game proved to
be interesting, it being the first professional baseball game I ever attended. While seated in the upper balcony of the huge arena, we watched the game from afar. The players appeared as minuscule figures in the stadium lights. A cold, stiff wind blew through the upper decks, up from the Potomac River, and we all huddled together under our coats and sweaters, trying to keep warm. I don’t remember who the Washington Senators played but I know they lost after going into overtime. The game ended very late into the evening.

   The trip down the Potomac on the riverboat turned out to be a thrill. A live band provided music for dancing. Never witnessing anything like it, fascination engulfed me. I marveled at the loud music, the strobe lights, and the crowd of people crammed onto the dance floor. I danced, carefree and uninhibited, with various girls from my class.

   At the amusement park, I climbed aboard ride after thrilling ride. I found the roller coaster to be the most frightening. With the protective roll bar lowered over my middle, the long roller coaster car filled with chatty people crept higher and higher into the night sky. The methodical click, click, click of the pull chain sounded beneath my feet. The flickering lights of many bright red, yellow, and blue neon signs flashed below me. Suddenly, without warning, the loaded car swooshed downward, plastering my clothes and hair to my body. It took my breath away and left my stomach in my throat. The onrushing wind shimmered my eyelashes before my eyes, creating a fuzzy haze. I squeezed the metal bar in front of me, hanging on for dear life. The zooming car ascended and descended each steep incline as it made its way down to the lower slopes. It sped around sharp curves while its many riders swayed from one side to the other screaming and squalling with glee. Some daring souls raised their hands into the air and
stood up, pretending to be brave, as the speeding roller coaster car zipped along. Finally, coming to a bumping, jolting halt back at the loading platform, I left the car all windblown, hushed and quiet. Many others moved to the ticket taker, passed through the metal turnstile, and clambered aboard, anticipating the thrill of the wild ride one more time.

After our fun-filled evening at the amusement park, our chartered bus picked us up and took us back to the motel. We left for home the next day tired and dreamy. Most of us slept all the way but we returned to the mountains filled with fond memories of our senior trip to Washington, D. C., our last outing together as a cohesive group. I still have a picture of the class, with chaperones, grouped together on the lawn in front of the Capitol building, its dome and massive columns impressive in the background.

As my final days at Sugar Grove High School drew nigh, leaving home and Appalachia became inevitable. Even though I longed for the opportunity to experience the outside world, and had done so for many years, I found my forthcoming departure troubling. For certain, my years as a student did include some fond memories, especially my last two years in school. But, such pleasantries often became overshadowed by far too many unpleasant and troubling realizations about myself as an Appalachian and as a student. Because I had not been born into the dominant discourse I found it exceedingly difficult to acquire such a discourse (Delpit, 1995).

I often wonder why I bothered to stay and "stick it out." Quitting would have been so much easier and a great deal less awkward. Furthermore, I would have brought to pass the self-fulfilling prophesies carried out by so many of my own family members as well as the dire predictions of several of my teachers.
Even so, over the preceding two years I had gained a wee bit of confidence in myself. Leaving Appalachia meant starting over again for "graduation would slap me squarely back" (Barker, 1995, p. 4) to the end of the line and I knew it.

But, I did not have a choice as to my leaving. I risked being drafted into the military. So, near the end of my senior year, a classmate since our early days at Teas Elementary School, talked me into joining the Coast Guard with him on the buddy system. At that time the Viet Nam war raged in Southeast Asia. Young men died every day. With us on the verge of being drafted, we reasoned that joining the Coast Guard made our chances of going to Viet Nam less likely. A Coast Guard recruiter came to the school and talked to us; we both signed up. A few weeks later we traveled to Roanoke, Virginia for physicals and entrance exams and then came back home to await graduation.

June 3, 1965! Graduation! It finally arrived! After years of humiliation, tears, pain, agony, fear, distrust, failure, unrest, dissatisfaction, and confusion, and with a few pleasurable times thrown in for good measure, I made it. I don't remember much about the ceremony itself. I know I walked across the stage and claimed my diploma while Mom and a few family members sat in the audience. I guess the graduation seemed a bit anticlimactic after being in school for so many years, and especially after the last two years happened to be so wonderful. In my memory book I found the following words written by me, a telling statement about my feelings towards my upcoming departure:

After so many years of school I find to my disappointment it is closing. I must now go out into the world leaving all my old friends and find new ones. I hope my life will always be as happy as my last
year of school, and that it [my last year] will always linger in my memory.
Chapter 8

Beyond the Ridges

One early morning,
in mid-June,
I walked down the rocky lane
from my house
on Barton Mountain.

Misty dew drops
dripped quietly
from arched overhanging grass stems.
They gently touched and soaked my shoes
as I passed by.

My thoughts wandered elsewhere.

I stood by the roadside,
waiting,
my belongings stuffed
into a brown paper bag.

The sun lingered
behind the rim
of Iron Mountain,
hulking to the east.

Old, faded, and black,
a battered and dented pickup truck,
covered with cow manure,
materialized with the first shadows.

Carrying me off,
it took me down
winding country roads,
to town,
beyond the ridges,
to far-flung regions,
away from the ancient mountains
with their blue-gray, smoky-haze,
melancholy whispers,
and family roots
dug deep
into the rocky Appalachian soil.

United States Coast Guard Training Center, Cape May, New Jersey

The time for leaving home did not arrive unexpectedly. With irreversible apprehension, Rob McKinley and I headed for boot camp at Cape May, New Jersey by hitching a ride with a local farmer to town. There, we boarded a bus bound for Roanoke, Virginia. In Roanoke we met two other new recruits and spent the day and evening at a downtown hotel as our orders directed. Then, we took the midnight train to New York. Debarking in Philadelphia, a local motor coach carried us to Cape May, New Jersey. We arrived there late into the afternoon. Another bus met us at the terminal in Cape May where other enlisted men sat waiting. It transported us to the United States Coast Guard Training Center for nine weeks of basic training.

The gray bus, loaded with new Seaman Recruits, perhaps fifty or sixty in number, stopped before the main gates to the United States Coast Guard Training Center. A high, chain link fence enclosed the area. Flags of the U. S. Coast Guard, the state of New Jersey, and the United States flapped in the breezes from massive spars jutting heavenward above the guardhouse. Gaining clearance from the guard on duty, the bus driver maneuvered the growling machine under the flapping flags. He wound his way through a series of gray-white, wooden-framed buildings, most likely built during World War II, or soon thereafter. These older buildings, barracks, officer’s quarters, and offices, all clustered together near the center of the compound. Newer barracks of brick construction, and several stories high, loomed in the distance. The driver stopped the coach before one of the older structures and flung wide the gray bus’s doors.
A petty officer dressed in a white uniform with several brightly colored ribbons and medals pinned to his chest entered. He talked to us from the front of the crowded vehicle, welcoming us to the Coast Guard training center and telling us that we should form a line on the sidewalk at his command. Afterwards, we were to move as quickly as possible to our temporary living quarters. At his bellowed directions, "FALL OUT," we all scrambled from our seats and formed a crude line beside the vehicle.

He called out our names from a roster attached to a stiff clip board, last name first: "Kirk, Luther R., McKinley, Robert M." As boldly as possible, we answered, "Here!" Thereafter, my identity became a series of digits: service number, 360-188; roster number, 58; and, in a few weeks, my company name and number would be, Lima 58. Walking double time as ordered, we followed the petty officer through the narrow streets. Looking like a gaggle of geese, we pathetically bobbed up and down and waddled to and fro, grossly out of step, as we moved along. Seasoned sailors watched from spotless sidewalks and grassy patches. All three—seasoned sailors, spotless sidewalks, and grassy patches—seemed inordinately crisp, clean, and neatly clipped to me.

Hustling along single file, we made our way to another old building where we thumped and bumped our way into the spacious structure. The absence of dust and the pretentiously shined and waxed floors of brown tile gave the place a surrealistically bizarre appearance. I quickly learned that incoming prospective sailors spent their idle hours waxing, shining, and cleaning this facility, an outdated dormitory which served as temporary barracks for new recruits. They stayed there for a week or so awaiting assignments to different forming companies. Also, during the interim, physicals, dental checks, hair cuts and the issu-
ance of regulation uniforms took place. A series of painful inoculations also began.

Filled with cots, the cavernous building appeared to be a storehouse for beds. In orderly rows of spindly cold steel, and stacked two high, they stood at attention, rigid and motionless mounted one atop the other, on each side of the vast rectangular room. Huge windows lined both end walls. I remember seeing the ocean for the first time ever from one of these windows. Sometime, during my first week of boot camp, I looked in awe as in the distance I saw huge white capped waves break away from the blue-green horizon line separating the sea and sky. The prancing waves, rearing up like agitated, hissing, hooded cobras, rolled upon the sandy shore. Then, reaching a climax and collapsing upon themselves into writhing, tangled heaps, the roily waters slithered back into the dark depths of the possessive ocean, a jumbled mess of white foam and cold, soupy, salty, brine.

After being issued a white cotton sheet, a pillow case, and a gray wool blanket, each of us picked a cot. The petty officer in command gave us a quick lesson on how to make the bed military style: sheets pulled tight, all bedding tucked into box pleats on each corner, blanket stretched firmly so that a quarter, if dropped on the taunt covering, bounced upward sharply. Afterwards, we ran to the mess hall for dinner where we ate in stone silence. More experienced sailors nearing the end of their boot camp training and pulling mess hall duty as part of their nine weeks experience, barked orders around us. "Eat up and get out! Eat up and get out!" they demanded over and over.

Here and there in the mess hall, I noticed small groups of men, perhaps two or three together, wearing dyed red sailor hats and dyed red spats. They
wore these red pieces of clothing with their work outfits—chambray shirts and
dungaree trousers. Turned down to just above their eyebrows, the red hat brims
covered most of their eyes. Looking like red legged storks, they stood at atten-
tion, on one foot, eating their food. They teetered and bobbled, desperately trying
not to lose their balance. A petty officer circled near them, constantly muttering
indecipherable orders, often directly into their faces. To each insult or question,
they responded loudly, "YES SIR!" or "NO SIR!" Upon leaving the mess hall, the
publicly humiliated men, after emptying their trays, picked up a wet, smelly mop
standing against the wall and a dirty mop bucket. Using one hand, they posi-
tioned the wet mop strands directly before their faces and carried the dirty bucket
in the other. They left the crowded mess hall at double time, the petty officer in
quick pursuit hurling profanities and insults at their every step. Later I learned
that collecting too many demerits for uncleanness, wrinkled clothes, unshined
shoes, dirty towels, or a plethora of other infractions warranted such punishment.
When not marching, running, or engaged in constructive activity, the men being
punished mopped, cleaned, and suffered disgrace and open humiliation before
their peers.

After dinner, we ran back to the barracks, finally to rest and talk before
bedtime, and to get to know each other. Some of us sat on our bunks, others
sprawled on the waxed, slick, and shiny floor. The smokers moved to the smok-
ing area outside the barracks for a cigarette. Yet others stayed by themselves,
quiet and alone. I said very little. My buddy from high school, a bit more outgoing
than I, joined in the many hushed conversations. Coming from various states---
Oklahoma, Virginia, Texas, New York, Michigan, Maryland, and West Virginia---
different accents, dialects, and speech patterns all mingled together, becoming a potpourri of drawls, twangs, whines, and precise pronunciations.

That night, after being issued towels, washcloths, soap, shampoo and shaving items, we took showers as a group. Waiting in line naked, one behind the other until our turn came, we moved into the shower stalls in groups of two or three, while the petty officer orchestrated the whole affair. I crawled into my clean bed, tired, confused, and weary after such a long day. Just at 10:00 P.M. the lights went out, leaving the building in total darkness, except for the red exit lights bleeding into the night. My strange surroundings grew still, save for a stray cough, a quiet sniffle, or the turning of a tired body upon a squeaky cot. A wayward gust of wind rattled the loose windows of the old barracks. In the distance, the sad, forlorn notes of taps sounded across the quiet military compound. Lonesome and homesick, I turned my head into my pillow, anticipating and stifling any sobs which might escape. My stiff Appalachian pride disallowed such weakness. I vowed that no one would ever discover the trepidation I felt. I drifted off into a deep, deep sleep.

Reveille sounded just as dawn broke over a darkened eastern sky. Morning came, accompanied by howling winds, threatening clouds, and endless rain squalls. The wind rattled the windows; the rain beat against the panes. A true "nor' easter," something new to me, had moved in overnight and would hang around for several days. The petty officer arrived and began barking orders again. Once more, I found myself using the lavatory with several other men. We pulled on the same street clothes we arrived in, and would continue to wear until uniforms happened to be issued. The clothes, already becoming rank and smelly, got worse as the week progressed.
Sloshing in the dripping wet and pushing against the gusting winds, we ran wherever we went. After breakfast, we trotted over to the barber shop for hair cuts. I stood in line on the sidewalk waiting my turn. Person after person, boasting hair of various lengths and styles, quickly walked inside the barber shop and returned, their heads shaved, with only a faint shadow of dark stubble showing. I felt the buzzing tingle of the clipper as it grazed my skull, bzzzzzzzzzzzz. The hair fell in wads and left all of my childhood scars, and private knots, wens, moles, and warts, exposed. My excessively large ears protruded from the side of my head like distorted wings.

Because I had already endured one humiliating physical at my induction proceedings in Roanoke, I did not anticipate experiencing another one. But, such wishful thinking proved to be wrong. The same degrading process would be repeated. One morning after breakfast, we loped over to sick bay for complete physicals. Asked to remove our clothes, we waited in a long line, approximately sixty men altogether. There we stood---tall, short, fat, skinny, stocky, muscular, brown, black, and white---naked as the day we were born, shaved heads, scars, and all. A doctor and his assistant, both dressed in crisp, white smocks, moved down the line.

Asking each person to identify himself, the assistant found the correct chart. Then, the doctor, placing a gloved hand on one side of each man's testicles, said, "Turn your head to the side and cough." He repeated the process on the other side. His assistant recorded the information according to the doctor's directions. Also, the doctor peered inside our ears with a small light, declaring loudly upon occasion, "Your head is nasty. Haven't you ever heard of going to a doctor and having him flush your ear canals?" I hadn't. But, next came the most
humiliating act of all. "Turn, face the wall, bend over and spread your cheeks."
The physician and his assistant then moved down the aisle of men and from a
distance shined a flashlight into each upturned rectum, taking notes all the while.

This physical inspection also included the first of a series of painful inoculations which continued over the next few weeks until they were all complete.
Moving down the line, the doctor placed a vaccinating gun securely against each
man's shoulder. The medicine entered the flesh with a "pish." A large fellow in
front of me collapsed. They revived him by waving smelling salts under his nose.
Relieved, we finally returned to our smelly and dirty street clothes only to be taken
for dental checks. Two weeks later I had a rotten tooth extracted. The dentist
declared it beyond repair. The pulling out of the tooth left a gaping hole amid my
jaw teeth which remains there still.

Ultimately, after about three days, the dispensation of uniforms took place.
We ran over to the "small-stores issuing room" (The Coast Guardsman's Manual,
1964, p. 193) to be fitted and measured. We returned with a sea bag stuffed full
of hats, clothes, towels, and shoes. All required labeling. That evening we made
our way to a large room on the second floor of the barracks. There we stripped
again and under close scrutiny labeled all items according to Coast Guard regu-
lations, placing our name and service number on each article of clothing: For ex-
ample, shoes---inside, near top (initials only); drawers---on the outside of right
half of the waistband; coat (Peacoat)---on the lining, each side of slit of tail, 3
inches from and parallel to bottom; also on the lining below the breast pocket
(The Coast Guardsman's Manual, 1964). Dumping our fetid street clothes into a
box, we mailed them home, the last vestiges of civilian life disappearing into the
mail chute.
We packed away our dress uniforms until the completion of company assignments. But, until then, when we would be expected to adhere to the uniform of the day while not working, we wore work uniforms. They consisted of high, black, shoes with safety toes, black socks, a chambray shirt, dungaree trousers with a webbed belt, and a white sailor’s hat (The Coast Guardsman’s Manual, 1964). Even though the new cotton uniforms did not fit properly, being excessively large, we were expected to wear them anyway. With shaved heads, the round hats fell down over our ears. We rolled up the legs of our pants and the sleeves of our shirts. Our belts bunched our trousers and shirts around our middles. Looking like a cluster of ragamuffins, we anticipated laundry day. Hopefully our new clothes would return shrunken to proper size. They did after several washings through boiling water.

I stayed in forming company for almost two weeks awaiting assignment. Those who joined the Coast Guard on the buddy system could not be separated. But, Rob, due to dental problems, received orders to report to Staten Island, New York for a special operation. His departure meant a prolonged stay for me in boot camp if the officer in charge abided by the original orders. Suddenly, the commanding officer called me, along with a few other recruits who had joined on the same plan, to his office. There, he told us that even though he understood the rules of the buddy system he planned to wait no longer. So, making an administrative decision, he assigned each of us to a company. I moved all of my belongings to the third floor of one of the new brick high rises for enlisted men and joined company, Lima 58.

For most of my remaining weeks in boot camp, my company ran wherever it went. Then, it waited. After marking time, marching in place to correct any er-
rors in alinement [sic] (The Coast Guardsman's Manual, 1964), and then breaking rank, we stood in line "heel to toe." In other words, one man's toe rested against the man's heel in front of him. Sexual innuendoes ran rampant. I heard such phrases as "heel to toe," "nut to but," and "make your buddy smile" over and over. At the slightest infraction—getting out of step, not answering "YES SIR" loud enough, or just being sloppy—we dropped and gave ten, twenty, or thirty push-ups on command.

Intentionally ornery drill instructors made life miserable for new recruits. An instructor might send a recruit to fetch a cup of coffee from the mess hall, giving him very explicit and clear instructions: three-fourths of a cup, an eighth of a teaspoon of sugar, one-half teaspoon of cream. Upon the recruit's return, the instructor might fly into a rage, accusing the individual of putting one-half teaspoon of sugar in the cup. Back and forth the confused recruit might go, a dozen times or more, until he got the directions straight. More than likely the charade ended with the person dropping and giving forty push-ups.

Instructors called surprise inspections and then emptied individual sea bags out third floor windows, demanding the owners reclaim, roll, and store all clothing properly. Sailors carried their mattresses about on their heads all day—to the mess hall, to the bath room, to the gymnasium—for improperly made beds. They wore, slept, and showered in life jackets for not securing them properly during rowing or other boating safety instructions. Individuals slept with their .30, M1 rifle, called their "piece," (The Coast Guardsman's Manual, 1964, p. 350) for not keeping it properly cleaned and oiled. They picked up cigarette butts from the smoking area, apologizing to each one as they placed it in a pail. I once saw a bumbling recruit ordered to tie spats around his head, simulating the blinders
placed on a mule, and then run around the gymnasium braying like a jackass, "Heehaw! Heehaw! Heehaw!" An individual might be ordered to run to the ocean, fill his hat with water, and return to the barracks area before the water all drained out. He might be sent back time after time until the instructor got tired of such foolishness.

I found myself marching around and around the quadrangle in front of the barracks one hot Sunday afternoon, carrying my "piece" at "right shoulder arms" (The Coast Guardsman's Manual, 1964, p. 349). Close inspection had revealed a dust line on the towel draping the bed frame at the foot of my cot. I learned to shake my towel each morning, removing any dust settling there overnight.

We walked for hours practicing for "marches, drills, and ceremonies" (The Coast Guardsman's Manual, 1964, p. 376), singing bawdy and ribald songs as we did so. Marching along, a designated precentor near the front of the drill unit sounded out, in a high-pitched, nasal, sing-song voice, "Hup, too, thuh-ree, fo-wer. Hup, too, thuh-ree, fo-wer. Left, left---left, right, left. Give me your left."

"Thump," the deadened thud of sixty heavy boots striking the hard pavement in unison sounded loud.

The precentor's voice continued to chant, "I've got a girl upon the hill. She won't do it but her sis-ter will."

Sixty male voices answered in response, "I've got a girl upon the hill. She won't do it but her sis-ter will."

The precentor nasally chimed in again, "Left, left---left, right, left. Give me your left."

"Thump!"

All together, "Wun, too, thuh-ree, fo-wer---wun, too---thuh-ree, fo-wer."
The precentor recited the next verse, "I've got a gir-l way out west. She's got mountains on her chest."

In harmony, "I've got a gir-l way out west. She's got mountains on her chest."

Again, "Wun, too, thuh-ree, fow-er---wun, too---thuh-ree, fo-wer."

I arose one morning and crumpled by my bedside, wincing in pain as needle-like pricks radiated outward from the bottoms of both feet. Marching in heavy boots so much had caused the arches of my feet to collapse. I pulled myself back onto the top bunk and let my tingling feet dangle over the edge for a moment. Then, easing myself gently to the floor, I hobbled to the bathroom. The pain subsided little by little as I moved about. I continued on with the running and marching, ignoring the pain, pretending it to be just another part of my boot camp experience. I told no one. Even though the pain, on several different mornings, became so intense and unbearable that I could hardly stand, I dared not go to sick bay. The fear of failure made me suffer alone. I did not want to be discharged and sent home. Hopefully the pain would disappear on its own. Surely, no one would notice. Eventually, life would return to normal. It did.

I acquired much military, practical, and life-saving knowledge as a new recruit at Cape May, New Jersey during basic training. I learned when and how to salute properly, how to dress appropriately, which uniform to wear, and how to march in a variety of formations. I found out about water and boat safety, first aid, and general Coast Guard history and knowledge. I learned how to row a boat in the waters off Cape May. I picked up information on tying knots, Morse code, and communicating through the use of signal flags. I obtained skill in how to handle and care for the U. S. rifle, caliber .30, M1 (The Coast Guardsman's
Manual, 1964), how to fire it on the firing range, as well as how to use it in drills. I satisfactorily completed the obstacle course and learned how to swim---two of my most trying endeavors.

The obstacle course included walls to scale, both sloping and straight, rope ladders to climb, logs to balance on, hurdles to jump over, sand pits to crawl across, and ropes to swing on. It involved push ups, pull ups, sit ups, and different running events. Most of these hurdles I accomplished rather quickly. But, pull ups proved to be the most difficult. While the instructor stood by screaming and yelling and emphasizing again and again what a weakling I was, my face turned red, and my legs and feet hung stiff, just above the floor, as though anchored there. Unable to move upward so that I could place my chin over the bar, I wiggled and squirmed, subconsciously pleading with my heavy body to lighten up and give some help. But, my upper arms simply lacked enough strength to lift my body's weight as it dangled from a horizontal bar. No amount of the instructor's screaming and yelling, or my pleading with myself, would change that fact. So, every night for a week or two, disgraced, I went to the gym and practiced pull ups until I passed the test.

My first time on the obstacle course, I ran through the first set of barriers without any trouble. But, eventually I reached a wall about six feet high. It stood just short of the end of the obstacle course. Getting over the wall required taking a running leap, locking the elbows over the top, pulling up with the upper arms, and then dragging the rest of the body over. Already exhausted, I ran for the wall and jumped as high as I could. My chest landed with a dull thud against the wall's hard surface. My elbows caught over the top, close up under my arm pits. But, I
did not have enough strength to continue. I hung there for an instant and then slid back, the edge of the wall raking the tender skin underneath my arms.

The instructor flew into a rage. "GET YOUR SORRY, SKINNY ASS OVER THAT DAMNED WALL LITTLE MAN," he bellowed. I tried again. The same thing happened. The tender flesh on the underside of my upper arms raked across the edge of the wall. I tried once more but could not reach the top of the obstruction. I quit. I simply stood there, leaning against the wooden structure, hearing, but ignoring, the wrath of the drill instructor. Finally, after making me run in place for five minutes, along with two or three other people in the same predicament, he let me pass around the barrier and finish the course. The underside of my arms grew red and raw. Over the next few days scabs formed in thin sheets where long, thin lines of blood oozed out and caked on the skin. The next time I went to the obstacle course, I made damned sure I had enough energy left when I got to that wall. I flew across it, vowing that it would never stop me again.

I found, upon entering the military, that every Coast Guardsman must, and would, learn to swim. Even though I had played in the creeks and rivers at home every summer, I never felt comfortable in deep water. One day my entire company jogged over to the swimming pool for swimming tests. Even though we had been issued bathing suits, we were not allowed to wear them. This made no sense to me. We showered, removing all loose body hair, before we went into the pool; hair clogged the pool’s filtering system. Wearing bathing suits it seems would have helped curb the hair problem. Never-the-less, sixty naked men stood by the edge of the pool awaiting directions from a clothed swimming instructor and his assistants.
The instructor asked those who could swim to move to one side of the pool. About twenty, myself included, stayed on the opposite side. Eventually every person in the company would accomplish this first exercise, which he was about to explain, but those who could not swim would go first. He directed all non-swimmers to line up by the steps leading up to the high dive. Next, he instructed us to climb the steps, walk to the end of the diving board, place our hands over our genitals, and step off, falling straight down into the deep end of the pool. When we bobbed to the surface, an assistant would extend a long pole to us. However, if we panicked and attempted to climb out of the water on the pole, the assistant would thrust us back to the bottom of the pool and would continue to do so until we learned to relax. Swimming, he informed us, simply involved jumping into deep water. It came instinctively because fear of drowning forced such survival skills to the surface. Furthermore, stepping off the diving board simulated being thrown overboard while on a boat or ship, something we may have to deal with as sailors.

For non-swimmers, the idea of jumping into deep water and surviving seems impossible. It makes them hold back, overwhelmed at the thought of drowning, afraid of dying. Diffidence reared its ugly head that day. As the first man in the line of naked men started to climb the steps to the diving board, another one collapsed into a sobbing heap pathetically begging to start in the shallow end of the pool. His pleas went unanswered. Dragged to the edge of the pool, the assistants tossed him in. He came up splashing and sputtering. In a panic he grabbed for the extended pole but was sent plunging under the water again. Eventually he calmed himself enough to crawl out of the pool gasping and heaving for breath. Another man clung to the metal steps leading up to the high
dive. The assistants yanked him loose from his mooring and tossed him into the deep water kicking and screaming. He came up splashing and gurgling only to be pushed back under time after time.

I awaited my turn, standing in line with my head shaved, my body naked, my skin pasty white, wet, and cold, and my spirit on the edge of breaking. Such ignominiousness exacts a certain feeling in people. Humiliation for some becomes their driving force, their source for growth and change. They swallow their pride and ignore the embarrassment. They vow to rise above the degrading comments, opinions, and actions of their defilers. Others simply accept such degradation, becoming mindless as to what others might think, say, or feel about them. I believe myself to be one of the former.

Fear welled up from deep within but no one would ever know. I climbed up the slick steps to the diving board. I waited while the man ahead of me faltered for just an instant but then stepped forward, cascading downward to land with a splash. Below me, standing near the edge of the pool, naked men gawked, waiting in suspenseful silence. Determined, I walked to the end of the high board, clamped my hands over my genitals, shut my eyes, and stepped forward.

I felt myself helplessly falling. I pointed my toes downward hoping that such a simple act might ease my entrance into the green, chlorinated depths awaiting me below. The surface of the water erupted with a splash as I slid into the darkness of this cold wet tomb through its aqueous door. Closing over my head, the chilly liquid felt heavy. It clutched at me, squeezing more and more of my body, and dragging me deeper and deeper. The monstrous pressure of the deepening water seemed to suck all of the air from my lungs, collapsing them,
leaving them empty with no way of filling them up again, except with liquid. Morbid thoughts of death by drowning flirted with my mind.

After an eternity, my lungs desperately aching for air, I touched bottom. I pushed off, using as much forward thrust as possible, and went shooting upward, fighting the pressure and weight of the water engulfing me, clinging to me, withdrawing all life from within me, and threatening to rob me of my very soul. My head broke the surface, my lungs screaming for oxygen. Suddenly, a pole appeared before my watery eyes. I reached for it but took it gently, forcing all panic aside. Dragged to the side of the pool, I crawled out and lay there exhausted, a gasping, heaving, dripping mass of wet, shivering, and mortified, soggy flesh.

Afterwards, I took swimming lessons with approximately thirty other men. The lessons lasted for about two weeks, four nights a week. The swimming instructors exhibited no compassion and offered very little instruction. On only one occasion do I remember an instructor actually doing any teaching. He took us to the shallow end of the pool and showed us how to breathe properly by taking in great gulps of air, plunging our faces under water, and then expelling the air slowly through the mouth and nose. Always stark naked, and starting by stepping off the high dive into deep water, we floundered and splashed our way from one end of the pool to the other. The instructors walked up and down the side of the pool hurling insults and screaming obscenities between, "MOVE YOUR SORRY, SKINNY ASS! STROKE! STROKE! STROKE! DAMN YOU, STROKE!"

Eventually, I learned enough to pass the test but I went through sheer hell and stubborn determination in doing so. I found the experience both degrading and frightening. Taking swimming lessons on my own since then has not eased the tension I still harbor towards deep water.
My company spent the last two weeks of boot camp on duty in the mess hall. My job, among many, included scraping plates and washing dishes. I viewed mess hall duty as a kind of quiet reprieve, almost as a reward, for having lasted so long. We arose early in the morning, before daylight, and stayed until well after dark, most of the marching, running, yelling, screaming, and classes having gradually come to an end. Taking occasional breaks, we practiced marches and drills for final graduation.

In the hot August sun, and among pomp and circumstance, I graduated victorious from boot camp. With flags flying, banners waving, and drums rolling, each battalion, consisting of two or more companies clad in full dress white uniforms, passed in review. On command, we turned our heads eyes right as we marched in perfect cadence before the viewing stands where the dignitaries and visitors sat watching. We stood at attention, at parade rest, or assembled into marching formations as the ceremony continued. A speck in the crowd, I felt lost, lonely, insignificant, and forgotten. Involved in my own self-praise for having reached the end, I glorified in my own superiority for no one could ever fully appreciate the hell I endured in reaching this glorious, but sad moment. No one, but me. When we broke ranks, I picked up my orders and learned that after a ten day leave of absence I would report to Boston, Massachusetts, headquarters for the First Coast Guard District.

Today, as I write about the end of my boot camp experience, a state of pensive reverie washes over me. I don't recall feeling sad about graduating then. Why today? Because, today I know I left the United States Coast Guard Training Center with a strong sense of personal accomplishment. I graduated wiser, more mature, and more physically fit than I ever thought imaginable. Today, I also
know that, serendipitously, my exit from Appalachia had begun. After such an experience, and numerous adventures to come, much time would pass before I could ever return to the mountains, hills, and hollows of Southwest Virginia and be content (see Figure 15, p. 197a).

Furthermore, while in boot camp, I learned a valuable lesson in humility, fortitude, and courage. For those intangible rewards I am grateful; many men did not survive the experience. Some received early discharges because of physical problems, others left for psychological reasons. Still others simply would not or could not adjust. Several times I witnessed grown men, far stronger than I felt myself to be, both physically and psychologically, collapse from exhaustion or melt into screaming, sobbing heaps. They simply could not withstand the humiliation, regimentation, constant demands, and applied pressures of boot camp.

During leave, I came home alone after taking the ferry from Cape May, New Jersey to Lewes, Delaware. From Delaware, I slowly made my way south by bus and train, stopping in Baltimore, Fairfax, and Manassas for short visits to brothers and sisters on my way back to the mountains. After our separation in forming company, Rob McKinley and I rarely saw each other over the summer. After his return from Staten Island, New York, he entered another company and graduated two weeks after I did. Upon graduation from boot camp, I reported to the U. S. Coast Guard Base in Boston; he traveled elsewhere. Ten years lapsed before our paths chanced to cross again.

Last summer, while vacationing at the beach in Delaware, I rode the Cape May-Lewes ferry once more, almost to the day of my graduation from boot camp thirty years earlier. I wrote about the trip in my journal:
Wed., Aug. 9, 1995

On August 15, 1965, I was released from the Coast Guard Training Center at Cape May, N. J. after boot camp. I don't remember how or when I left the Coast Guard base, who was with me, or why I decided to do it this way but I know I made my way from the base somehow and went to the Cape May-Lewes ferry. I rode the ferry across the Delaware Bay from New Jersey to Delaware and from some place in Delaware, (It must have been Lewes, or Rehoboth Beach.) I took a bus to Baltimore, on to Manassas, and then [I rode the train] home to Marion.

I remember waiting for hours it seemed in a bus station somewhere in Delaware, all alone. It was 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning before the next bus arrived. I don't remember anything else about the trip. When did I get to Baltimore? I know I visited Vera. When did I get to Manassas? I know I visited Red, Val and Morris, and Paul and Bea. I stayed at Paul's for a day or two. He lived in a big white house outside Manassas at Brentsville. I then took the train to Marion from Manassas. I know that I was on a 10 day furlough but I don't remember arriving home or what I did after I got there. I do know that I boarded the train to Boston after my 10 day leave and my life has never been the same since.

Today, almost exactly 30 years later, Katy, Andrew, Maggie, Maria, and I rode the Cape May-Lewes Ferry to Cape May, N. J. and back. We stood upon the top deck and watched as cars, buses, and trailer trucks pulled aboard. The huge boat rolled with
the swells as we crossed the mouth of the Delaware Bay, the wind whistling in our ears, the sun beating on our heads. We ate snacks and had drinks in the air conditioned lounge. We didn't get off in N. J. but returned on the same ferry. Who would have thought 30 years ago that I would return [today]? Another story and a piece of my life took shape then [at the Coast Guard Training Center]. Today's trip wasn't planned as an anniversary as such. This morning we decided to take the kids on a ferry ride and suddenly I remembered it had been almost 30 years to the day that I had been released from boot camp across the bay in N. J.
Figure 15 - Luther Kirk - U. S. Coast Guard
Chapter 9

Surrounded by Strangers

On a hazy, misty morning in late August, I stood by the railroad tracks near the train station in Marion, Virginia, alone. A rumble sounded distantly. Suddenly, a long, low wail blasted the silence and the noisy and cumbersome passenger train lumbered into view from around the curve. It rolled out of the foggy damp, halted before the station platform, and sat there, its massive engine thrumming. I slung my heavy sea bag upon my shoulder and waited. A blue clad conductor descended the stairs from inside one of the passenger cars. He placed a pair of portable metal steps near the entrance. I waited for someone to exit. Since no one did, I climbed aboard.

Stowing my sea bag in the storage compartment near the door, I found a seat by myself and removed my sailor hat, placing it on the cushion beside me. The half empty car appeared clean, the aisle apparently just recently swept. A starched white doily draped the headrest. The string of cars departed with a jolt as the aftershock left by harsh tugs on the metal couplings between the coaches rippled through the train. I settled back and waited. The conductor entered from the front end of the moving conveyance. He walked down the aisle and collected my ticket, telling me that I switched trains in Washington, D. C. He left through the rear door.

As the train picked up speed, the dull thump-thump-THUMP, thump-thump-THUMP, thump-thump-THUMP of rolling metal sounded beneath my feet. The massive wheels rhythmically bumped across the seams in the endless steel rails. With more speed, the thumping got faster and the thuds sounded closer to-
gether. As the bulky machine moved forward, I thought to myself: At home, when Red and I used to line up the old ladder back chairs with their split hickory bottoms and play train, it didn't sound like that at all; it went chick-a-lack-a, chick-a-lack-a, chick-a-lack-a, wooo, woooo.

Familiar scenes floated by outside my window—farms, hills, and mountains. I turned my head away from the passing sights and flashing memories and concentrated on my inside surroundings instead. A few people sat scattered here and there, their heads nodding, barely visible above the high seat backs. The still air wafted the traveler's low, hushed, and muddled voices throughout the passenger car in a jumbled mess. The rolling coach gently swayed back and forth, sporadically emitting shrieks of pain as its wheels jangled around sharp curves. The chain of coaches lazily wound its way north passing through small towns along the way—Rural Retreat, Wytheville, Pulaski, Dublin, Radford, Christiansburg, Salem, and on to Roanoke. Ultimately the passing scenery changed and less familiar sights began to appear outside my window. The land flattened out, the mountains disappeared, towns and villages grew closer together, and more and more people boarded. The sharp curves in the railroad tracks, once holding the mighty engine in check as it wound serpentine through the mountains of Southwest Virginia, began to straighten out more and more. This allowed the thundering machine to charge straight ahead across the flat landscape.

Late into the day the train pulled slowly and steadily into Union Station, Washington, D. C. I donned my hat, found my sea bag, hoisted it to my shoulder once more, and exited with a stream of passengers making their way down a long corridor to the main terminal. I entered the enormous railway station, bobbing along amid throngs of commuters, and sought out the information booth. I asked
the lady behind the counter when the next train left for Boston and on what track.
I bought a sandwich and a drink and found a seat on one of the hard benches. I
waited, fascinated by the scores of people moving about. Suddenly, echoing
through the hollow chambers of the cavernous depot, and from high up in the
shadows of the domed structure, came a nasal, monotonous, rhythmical, and ca-
denced announcement: "Train num-ber ten is now board-ing at gate five with
stops at Bal-ti-more, Wil-ming-ton, Phil-a-del-phi-a, Tren-ton, Ne-wark, New York,
New Ha-ven, New Lon-don, Prov-i-dence, and Bos-ton. All a-board pl-ease." I
picked up my sea bag and followed the crowd of journeymen to the boarding site.

I walked for miles it seemed down a narrow corridor and then down the
lengthy platform beside the train, perhaps ten coaches long. Bulky and heavy, I
shouldered my cylindrical suitcase. Getting tired, I let the overstuffed satchel
dangle awkwardly by my side from the shoulder strap. It banged against my legs,
tripping me up. On occasion, I lugged the unwieldy bag along by the side handle,
straining to keep it from dragging on the dirty floor. The row of chained convey-
ances sat, patiently waiting, quickly filling up with travelers. The conductor
punched my ticket at the steps of the coach. I entered a much used, crowded,
and dirty passenger car and, after storing my sea bag in the overhead compart-
ment, shared a seat with a total stranger. No white doilies draped the seats. The
floors, soiled and spotted here and there, boasted smashed gobs of black, dirt
infested sticky gum, and bits of trash.

The train eased out of the station and then plunged headlong into the
night, its cars swaying, jangling, bumping and rolling. It haltingly moved in and
out of stations, loading and unloading scores of travelers. As the crowded vehi-
cle moved farther north, I sensed a change in the atmosphere and an unexplain-
able, oppressive weight ostensibly descended over me. I literally felt my personal space being uncontrollably detached, invaded, and subsumed by the dense, overcrowded, unfamiliar environment into which I found myself traveling. Petrified, I sensationalized the thought of becoming a naïve foreigner among impersonal strangers. An isolation, stronger than any I had ever felt in the Appalachia mountains of Southwest Virginia captured and swallowed me. Resignedly, I accepted the burdensome aura and sporadically dozed and woke, occasionally watching the lights intermittently flashing by outside my window.

Sometime after midnight, the string of rolling carriages descended into a gloomy, dingy, deserted, and dungeon-like labyrinth. My surroundings became even more oppressive as the long train burrowed like a gigantic earthworm beneath the massive skyscrapers of New York City. It crawled slowly through the dimly lit underground tunnel as though lost and blindly feeling its way along. Surrounded by a forest of vertical steel beams supporting a gray, dirty, and heavy concrete sky, the train stopped briefly to load late night travelers and to discharge a few tired passengers.

It grew cold in the chilly air of late night-early morning and I wished for something heavier than my dress summer whites to keep me warm. Intimidated, I refused to retrieve my sea bag from the overhead storage area and search for warmer clothing. The sun rose over the waters to the east. Its gloriously warm eye spotted the train still snaking its way north, moving deeper into New England.

Late into the morning, near noon, an unsteady conductor moved through the swaying passenger cars announcing loudly: "Back Bay station! Back Bay station! All passengers for Back Bay!" The train stopped briefly, began moving again, and then, soon after, the roving conductor entered once more and made
another announcement: "South Station! South Station! All travelers depart at South Station!" My long journey through the night from Appalachia had finally ended. But, my excursion into the unfamiliar world of big city living had hardly just begun.

I left the passenger car and walked down the long line of coaches, jostling, lugging, and tugging my burdensome sea bag again. I moved uneasily through the hustle and bustle of South Station, another prodigious piece of architecture with a high ceiling covering a stupendous lobby. Nasal announcements spewed forth from the public address system hidden far up in the airy heights. The voices of many hurried travelers and the movements of masses of people walking on the hard marbled surface below echoed and reverberated throughout the enormous complex.

I made my way to the main entrance, passed through the swinging, brass plated doors, and approached one of the several taxis lined up by the sidewalk in front of the building. Placing my heavy bag on the seat beside me, I told the driver to take me to the Coast Guard base at 427 Commercial Street. He drove silently through narrow winding streets surrounded by tall buildings, the sidewalks teeming with people. He stopped before an aged red-brick structure located in the city's North End on the banks of the Charles River where it empties into Boston Harbor.

After I checked in at the front desk, the petty officer on duty directed me to the transient personnel office located on the third floor. I turned my orders over to the personnel officer and then found the master at arms, a gruff boatswain's mate awaiting retirement. He issued me bedding and assigned me a cot in the transient quarters. Giving me a quick tour of the facility, he pointed out the mess hall,
the recreation room, the officer's quarters, the garage, the laundry room, the 
small stores, and the canteen. While awaiting orders, he informed me, I would 
perform various duties: raise and lower the flag; mop, wax, and shine floors; 
scrub toilets; punch a time clock while making the rounds on a rotating, four hour 
duty watch once or twice a week; and, a variety of other tasks. Each morning 
the boatswain's mate sounded reveille by entering from one end of the sleeping 
quarters, moving swiftly down the long line of metal bunk beds, and dragging a 
metal bar across each metal bed frame. For sure, this grating, inharmonious 
sound yanked one from slumber into sudden reality with a jolt.

From the third and fourth floor back windows of the old building, and gaz- 
ing across the Charles River towards Charlestown, gray, gargantuan air craft car-
riers sat at anchor in the naval shipyards. In the foreground, on the Boston side 
of the river, several wide concrete piers jutted out into the bay. Two or three 
Coast Guard cutters stood at anchor beside them. In a day or two I might receive 
permanent orders for one of these ships. They patrolled far out in the Atlantic 
Ocean along the northeast coast of the United States, monitoring weather condi-
tions, assisting in rescue work, and "aiding trans-ocean aircraft in navigation and 
communications" (The Coast Guardsman's Manual, 1964, p. 443). However, or-
ders might also come for one of the several Coast Guard stations or light houses 
flung like a string of flashing pearls all along the rocky shores of New England. 
Another possibility included duty on one of the lightships anchored several miles 
off shore. Positioned near important navigational points, their bass horns warned 
ships of impending dangers from reefs or shoals by sending out deep, throaty, 
moans, thrumming monotonously into the dark and fog, along with a characteris-
tic flashing beacon. Also, air stations from Quonset Point, Rhode Island to Ar-
gentia, Newfoundland required workers as well. Furthermore, the remote possibility existed that I might be assigned to an icebreaker. They often made excursions into the frigid waters of the Arctic and Antarctic ice fields (The Coast Guardsman's Manual, 1964).

Interestingly enough, none of these assignments ever came to pass. I received orders to work in the transient personnel office at the Coast Guard Base in Boston. Therefore, I moved to the permanent quarters on the fourth floor of the old building. I spent the next four years working as a yeoman, performing typing and clerical duties, preparing reports, and maintaining office records and files. In charge of personnel orders, I transferred and discharged incoming and outgoing transients.

My duties also included both guard and watch responsibilities. During a four hour guard shift every other weekend, and occasionally during the week, after my work day ended, I patrolled the main desk and answered telephones, fielded questions, and directed visitors. Watch duty involved moving around the base once or twice a week, and often on week ends, during the overnight hours, punching a time clock at various stations, both inside and outside the building. Also, via correspondence courses, I advanced through the lower pay grades. I moved from Seaman Apprentice to Seaman, from Seaman to Petty Officer, third class, and from Petty Officer, third class to Petty Officer, second class (The Coast Guardsman's Manual, 1964).

My prolonged stay in the transient personnel office at the Coast Guard base in Boston seemed unusual, almost uncanny, for The Guardsman's Manual (1964) explicitly states:
The Coast Guard is a seagoing organization, and its personnel are sailors who expect to be sent to sea and to distant places in the course of their Service careers. . . . After you have had a certain amount of continuous sea duty, or overseas duty, or combination of both, you become eligible for transfer to shore duty. (p. 148)

Never assigned to sea duty, I anticipated transferral after my two years ashore ended. But, on the contrary, the orders never came. Seemingly forgotten, I remained in my position as a yeoman for four years, never having to set foot on a ship, other than as a visitor.

Extremely lonely and homesick, it took a long time for the oppressive feeling I experienced on my trip north to dissipate. Acutely intimidated, I hid within the protective walls of the Coast Guard base for a while. But soon, I wandered out into the imposing city. An acquaintance took me to the United Services Organization (USO) located on Boylston Street across from the Boston Common. The USO, staffed by volunteers, many of them young women, served refreshments, offered games, and provided quiet places for military personnel to sit, read, write, or talk. They also presented free tickets to movies, plays, and other shows. Ultimately I took advantage of such free services, but not at first.

In the beginning, I wore my military dress uniforms each time I ventured out. Indeed, I believed that I must wear such clothing for the next four years. It never dawned on me that civilian attire might be allowed while away from headquarters. Eventually, however, at the urging of a friend, I made my way to one of the department stores downtown and bought a pair of pants, a sweater, and a shirt, the extent of my civilian wardrobe.
Afraid of getting lost, I learned how to follow one route to the USO center and back. Across from the Coast Guard base, where Hanover and Commercial Streets intersect, I took Hanover Street until it ended in Haymarket Square, a cobblestoned area with many boarded up warehouses and dilapidated buildings. I walked under the John F. Kennedy Expressway, an elevated Interstate 93, to Congress Street. The interstate’s road bed, resting on concrete girders, spanned Haymarket Square. After leaving Hanover Street and passing under the raised roadway, I walked up Congress Street to State Street, from State Street to Tremont, and then down Tremont to Boylston.

On week ends farmers and vendors sold produce and other merchandise from open air stalls set up around Faneuil Hall, an old historic brick building situated in the middle of Haymarket Square. The building dated back to earlier times in the city’s history. Farmers and vendors also established spaces under the heavy beams and narrow cement ceiling of the expressway. They hawked a variety of items from fruits and vegetables to flags and tee-shirts while speeding cars, trucks, and buses thumped, banged, and honked overhead. The renovation of Haymarket Square began while I lived in Boston. Faneuil Hall, restored to its former splendor, is now surrounded by many international restaurants, shops, and open air vendors.

Later, I ventured, with an acquaintance, into the gloomy subway tunnels and learned one route back and forth from the Coast Guard base to the USO using the mass transit system. Via a dank underground tunnel, smelling of strong urine and marred with graffiti, and crossing at the corners of Tremont and Boylston, I entered the Boylston Street station. Riding the train from there to North
Station, with stops at Park Street, Government Center, and Haymarket Square in between, I walked from North Station down Commercial Street to the base.

My new home rested on the edge of the city's Italian neighborhood. This ethnic section of Boston, characterized by an overcrowded maze of narrow streets densely lined with brick apartment complexes, red brick row houses, and two story flats all solidly jammed-packed together, sprawled outward, overspreading a low knoll. My first few trips down Hanover Street, the main artery running through the Italian section, fascinated me but somehow made me nervous. I walked this street often during my first years in Boston, always anxious to get to Haymarket Square and away from the hubbub, excitement, and strangeness of the place.

All ages of people wandered up and down the curved, crowded, and narrow sidewalk. Most of them spoke loudly and animatedly in their native Italian language. Old ladies chattered together. They moseyed along in their black lace up shoes, dark sweaters, or shawls, pulled snugly about their shoulders, black head scarves clamped tightly over their ears, and shiny black purses dangling from their crooked arms. Old men in black wing-tip shoes, gray pants, white shirts, and suspenders chided one another as they moved along. Young men in modern clothes and pointy-toed shoes, their dark hair slicked back, called to each other. Older girls giggled and laughed; children, played games on the sidewalk.

The smell of sawdust and blood drifted out of small markets along the street. All manner of butchered meats---rabbits, chickens, beef---hung before the windows, their bloody carcasses freshly killed and skinned or plucked. Sweet aromas mingled and mixed in the warm air, oozing from pastry shops with three tiered wedding confections, fancy birthday cakes, and other desserts displayed in
sunny windows. Shoe, clothing, food, and drug stores all lined the street, along with two ornate Roman Catholic churches, the first ones I ever saw. On special religious holidays, streams of people carrying icons representing sacred personages paraded through the crowded, narrow street singing or chanting prayers as they marched along. Such strange religious practices interested me but somehow seemed pagan. A year or so later I attended a Catholic mass at a downtown church on an invitation from one of the transients from the base, understanding nothing about the ancient ritual.

A small tree-shaded common, jammed between two brick walls, the ground covered with inlaid brick as well, just up the street from the Coast Guard base, provided a haven for talkers, snoozers, and checker and chess players. Mostly older men, they sat on the park benches, amid the cooing voices and flapping wings of bobbing pigeons. Engrossed in their activities, the Italian men played board games, dozed, and talked beneath the shadow of an impressive bronze statue of Paul Revere astride his horse. Speckled with bird droppings and snared in the middle of the enclosed area, the early American midnight rider stood frozen in time. The spire atop the steeple on the Old North Church jutted heavenward in the background, above the park's trees.

Mostly a loner, I made few close friends my first few years at the base. I quickly found that transients left suddenly, leaving an aching void much too deep. I did however get acquainted with a few people. For example, I got to know one person from Georgia. Quiet, shy, and homesick just as I, he spoke with a lisp in a slow southern drawl. We became comrades, exploring the subway system as well as many parts of the city together. Eventually though, I typed up orders sending him to a cutter working out of Providence, Rhode Island. Another fellow
from New Hampshire invited me to meet his family and visit his farm at Exeter one week end. Soon after, I prepared orders transferring him to Argentia, New-
foundland. An individual from Michigan took me to my first bar where I experi-
enced my first mixed drink, rum and coke. It made me desperately ill and I threw up all night. Incoming orders routed him to Portland, Maine. Another acquain-
tance ended up aboard the Coast Guard cutter Eastwind. He spent the next year in Antarctica. I discharged a friend for medical reasons and sent him home to Memphis, Tennessee. He introduced me to a girl from Ireland whom I dated for a while. Even the old boatswain's mate, who became my protector and confidant, retired. At different times, he invited me to his home in South Boston for dinner and to meet his wife and new adopted baby.

With time I became bolder and began to explore Boston on my own. Of-
ten, on Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons, I wandered across Beacon Hill with its steep, narrow, cobblestoned streets and gas lights, an area of million dollar brick row houses boasting antique hand blown glass window panes dating back to colonial times. I walked along the Charles River and watched rowing teams sculling over the cold water's choppy surface. Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! Crisscrossing the Boston Common, I passed along brick paths leading under spreading trees and on into open spaces with grassy lawns. Old cemeteries tucked away between high buildings charmed me. I watched squirrels, pigeons, and street people all begging for food and space in the public common. I ex-
plored the Boston Public Garden with its swan boats, weeping willow trees, stat-
ues, water fountains, and showy flower beds. The many storied department stores---Filene's and Jordan Marsh---found in the shopping district, dumbfounded
me. I zipped to the fiftieth floor observation deck of the Prudential Tower and gazed out in all directions at a bedazzling, scary, yet beckoning city.

After a while I became adept at using the subway system and found my way around the city unafraid. Riding to Revere Beach I wandered along its sandy shore and boardwalk. I visited Logan International Airport and watched the planes arrive from and depart to all parts of the world. These airport visits inspired me to fly home for Christmas for the first time during my initial winter in Boston. The subway took me to City Point. There I walked far out into the harbor on a curved arching path noting the comings and goings of the huge ocean freighters, their deep, bass, hollow voices bellowing across the quiet sunny harbor. I caught the elevated train to the Franklin Park Zoo, Arnold's Arboretum, and the Museum of Science & Hayden Planetarium. At the science museum I once viewed a beguiling display of Egyptian mummies. I rode to Cambridge, across the Charles River from Boston, and meandered through the book and magazine stalls on Harvard Square, touring the campus of Harvard University as well. I visited Charlestown, across from the Coast Guard base, where I climbed to a monument on the brow of Bunker Hill and then went aboard the U. S. S. Constitution anchored in the naval ship yards.

I couldn't seem to get enough of moving picture shows. At home, the few films I ever saw were mostly viewed from the grassy hillside in back of the drive-in movie theater near my sister's house. We walked up the steep hillside and sat in the grass watching the action on the big screen from a distance, picking up the sound from the open car windows below. Once, my nephew from Baltimore took me to see a John Wayne movie at the theater in Marion. There may have been
one or two other occasions which I have forgotten but I never had the opportunity to see many motion pictures down home.

In Boston, cheap movie houses lined Washington Street. I spent hours on Saturdays and Sundays, and often during the evenings after work, getting caught up on movies both old and new. The cinerama theater enthralled me more than any. I discovered that a seat in the middle of the mezzanine allowed me to fully experience such cinematographic productions. Positioned midway before the exceptionally large screen, which curved one hundred eighty degrees around the enormous theater, the action, movement, and stereophonic sound captured me completely. I remember seeing "The Greatest Story Ever Told" in one of these theaters.

I began to claim free tickets offered by the USO and attended such movie productions as "My Fair Lady," "The Sound of Music," "Doctor Zhivago," "Ryan's Daughter," and many more. Shown in richly decorated theaters boasting extra wide and high movie screens, and holding hundreds of people spread throughout the main floor, mezzanine, and balcony, the glitzy movie houses and the motion pictures left lasting impressions. I got passes to the stately Symphony Hall where, seated in one of the high wooden boxes, and cowed by the opulence surrounding me in the ornate music center, I watched intently as Arthur Fiedler conducted the Boston Symphony Orchestra. I obtained tickets for many first run Broadway plays such as "The Roar of the Greasepaint and the Smell of the Crowd" and other shows, such as Jimmy Durante and The Righteous Brothers. I went to sporting events, especially hockey and basketball games, played at the Boston Garden, an impressive but old and dark coliseum, part of the huge North Station train terminal.
For certain, I consider all of my experiences in Boston educational. Some escapades however might be categorized in ways other than elitist productions filled with sophistication, refinement, and glamour. Activities carried out in a section of the city called the "Combat Zone" happened to be downright crude, vulgar, raw, and dangerous. At length, I began to dabble in this bewitching world of adult theaters and book stores, tattoo parlors, cheap bars, drugs, and whores. At first, I timidly entered the "Combat Zone" with individuals from the base. I approached the area with hesitation, fear, and disgust, along with a greater amount of naive interest. Later, I ventured into the area on my own unalarmed and gullibly, or perhaps stupidly, unaware of its dangers.

Each night the dingy, narrow streets and side alleys, filling up this sleazy entertainment district, bubbled over with noise and confusion. It offered an array of sinful pleasures. Loud music, mostly rock and roll, but some country and western, issued forth from overcrowded cheap bars. The thumping drums, squealing guitars, squawking saxophones, and jingling tambourines all crashed together, creating a constant din. Alcohol flowed freely, the bar stools and tables crowded with imbibers. All manner of drugs passed hands in dark back rooms and under tables. Strobe lights bounced around jam-packed dance floors while outside, flashing, multi-colored neon signs split the night. Cars honked; sirens screamed. Brazen prostitutes, looking almost clownish in their heavy make-up, teased hair, tight skirts, straining blouses, and high heeled shoes, walked the streets. They pedaled their delicate wares from street corners, bars, and dark alleys. Homeless people, unwashed, dirty and smelly, roamed about. They urinated openly into alleyways, doorways, and onto the sidewalk, begging for handouts from each passerby.
Sometimes with a friend, sometimes alone, I made my way back to the Coast Guard base after squandering my time and money in the "Combat Zone." Often, late at night, I entered the ground at a dimly lit and deserted subway station---Milk, Boylston, Park, or Summer---and watched for the last train passing through the gloomy tunnels before daybreak. When the train arrived, rushing into the terminal as though in a hurry, I joined a few other late night riders on one of the jerking, careening, and rattling cars. I changed trains in some obscure tunnel along the way but eventually got off at North Station, another lonely and deserted place in the wee hours of the morning, and walked the rest of the way down shadowy, darkened streets unafraid. Today, I'm appalled at such reckless abandonment on my part.
Chapter 10
Caught Between Two Worlds

As the years slipped by I found myself being caught more and more between the recurrently harsh but colorful world of Boston and the tractable Appalachian environment of Southwest Virginia. Often, writers, particularly those dealing with the problems of minority groups, recognize this troubling phenomenon—the fear of being caught between two worlds. Herbert Kohl (1988) writes about it when he discusses the thirty-six children who made up his Harlem classroom, especially when he saw one of them struggling to succeed in a "New England Prep School" (p. 223). Richard Rodriguez (1983), a Hispanic-American, feels it deeply as he recognizes that his education is separating him from "his past, his family, and his culture" (p. 5). Victoria Purcell-Gates (1995) sees it first hand when she works with a displaced Appalachian family living a "marginal existence" (p. 18) in the city while "yearning to return to their mountain home" (p. 18).

Many Appalachian writers wrestle with this disturbing idea too. Emma Bell Miles (1975) is cognizant of it when she finds herself living "between two cultures" (p. xvii). She dwelled with "the mountain people on Walden’s Ridge" (p. xvii) but "her work as a writer and painter involved her intimately with the wealthy society people of Chattanooga" (p. xvii). Verna Mae Slone (1979) is troubled by it when she sees Appalachians leaving the area and being "forced to deny their heritage, change their way of talking, and pretend to be someone else, or be made to feel ashamed" (p. xiii). Loyal Jones (1994) writes of it when he takes note of the fact that "sense of place is one of the unifying values of mountain people, and it
makes it hard for us to leave the mountains, and when we do, we long to return" (p. 99).

Truly, I can readily identify with Garry Barker's (1995) assessment of how many "Appalachians live in an eerie time warp" (p. 20) with "one foot in the past and the other in the future" (p. 32). Eventually, I chose the latter, thinking "that to function with any effectiveness in the 'mainstream' world I had to learn to speak another language" (Barker, 1995, p. 196) and become someone else. I harbored no thoughts of learning how to "slip in and out of a different culture," (Barker, 1995, p. 196) in order to survive, or of learning "that I could change and still retain my deep-rooted mountain ways" (Barker, 1995, p. 196). Sadly, I decided that I must abandon my Appalachian roots for I believed that trying to live in both worlds simultaneously, something I didn't know how to do, would get me nothing but "scars, scorn, and scathing indignation from both directions," (Barker, 1995, p. 192). And, it did.

Finally traveling beyond the ridges, I found myself surrounded by what I often longed for---teeming masses, tall buildings, neon lights, wealth, decadence, and sinfulness---all beyond belief. Increasingly, I felt no need to hang on to any part of my Appalachian experience. Nevertheless, the changes did not come suddenly and they did not come easily. Most assuredly, as I traveled about the city of Boston and made contact with personnel at the Coast Guard base, the pain of being caught between two worlds became obvious. For instance, I left Appalachia with a sense of loss, failure, struggle, and shame, as well as a lack of trust, due to the hardships suffered at home and the many difficult experiences endured in school. But, nobody knew or cared about such inconsequential sentimentalities. Most obviously, I departed with certain "speech patterns," (Purcell-
Gates, 1995, p. 26) typical of many Appalachians, and quickly found out, as Victoria Purcell-Gates (1995) relates, that "other groups often use these language patterns to stereotype and make fun of 'hillbillies,' a discriminatory practice that is painfully suffered by Appalachians and urban Appalachians nationwide" (p. 211).

Saddlebagged with these many insecurities, some of my own making, many of them real, they wallowed to the surface occasionally reminding me of my Appalachian ways and eccentricities. For example, people outside of Appalachia, unaware of its history and culture, and disinterested, saw my need to be alone and my withdrawn behavior, a phenomenon related to the Appalachian "emphasis on self-sufficiency," (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 27) as quirky. To them, my mannerisms, customs, and speech patterns simply seemed odd and not the result of cultural differences, hardships, failures, distrust, or shame. Therefore, not understanding, they laughed at such idiosyncrasies. As a final consequence, their attitude towards me left me feeling even more lonely, odder, and more out of place than ever, reinforcing my need for a new identity.

Being treated as an inferior because of a mountain accent and cultural background can do strange things to a person. Hence, to get ahead and be socially accepted, many Appalachians try to erase all traces of their upbringing (Barker, 1995). Garry Barker (1995) writes: "I quit talking and started writing when they laughed at my Appalachian pronunciations" (p. 20). I too reacted to such offhanded treatment in my own personal ways. I vowed to keep myself aloof from others for I found myself becoming bitter and resentful toward their actions. And, I started the process of changing my dialect, the most obvious outward sign of coming from a different background.
I began staying alone and spending as much time off the base as possible. I took to drink, something my system could not tolerate for the binges often left me physically ill. Even so, I frequented the bars in the "Combat Zone" more and more. I became a chain smoker, going through at least a pack or more of cigarettes a day. While at the base, I played solitaire, read, or watched television when not working. I rambled about the city by foot or subway, intentionally returning to the barracks late at night hung over from too much alcohol and carousing. There were a few people with whom I talked and traveled; I dated a few girls from the USO; but, mostly I stayed alone.

Bitter and resentful, I lashed out at people. I guess I just became tired of feeling inferior. On one occasion a dental technician approached me and said, "You don't like me very much do you?" Sarcastic and sullen, as well as conceited, he disliked the way I walked, talked, and worked and often said so. He used the terms "hillbilly" and "dumb southerner" a lot. Being my superior, he seemed to take pride in the fact that he could harass someone as much as he did me and get away with it. I took advantage of his dumb question. My Appalachian pride and "ability to cut to the quick" (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 212) coiled upward like an agitated timber rattler. Quietly and calmly, I hissed, "I hate your god-dammed guts and wish you were dead! You run your god-dammed mouth all the time for no reason! Don't like you? I hate you!" I walked away leaving him standing, mouth agape. Needless to say, he got my message and his attitude changed. I typed up orders discharging him soon after though and never saw him again.

Another time, a yeomen, first class, who worked in the same office as I, asked if he might go downtown with a group of us bar hopping in the "Combat
Zone." This individual, loud and obnoxious, constantly criticized my actions and work. He had no tolerance for minority groups and used such derogatory terms as "niggers," "hicks," "hillbillies," and "dumb southerners" all the time. Lonely and having marital problems, he needed a friend but I had no sympathy for him simply because I felt he had none for me. A string of profanities spewed from my mouth: "Hell no, you can't come! If you think I'm going out with you at night, you're god-dammed stupid! I work with you all fuckin' day and listen to your damned mouth! I'm sure as hell not going to spend the god-dammed night with you too!"

Crushed, the poor fellow's face fell as I walked away, leaving him standing there stunned into silence. His attitude towards me didn't change. As a matter of fact, it became worse. But finally, his enlistment ended and I wrote his discharge papers.

I began to consciously change my dialect by concentrating on my speech patterns and thinking about how I worded my sentences and used certain expressions. Appalachians from my part of Virginia already spoke quite rapidly, a contrast to how many strangers often think we vocalize. Some outsiders, geographically confusing us with people from the deep south, another stereotyped group of individuals, believe all southerners eat grits and have a syrupy, sweet, slow way of pronouncing words and dealing with life. On the contrary, I never tasted grits, dealing with life at a slow pace seemed lazy to most mountain people I knew, and my family's voice cadence never slowed down, especially when excited. For instance, when talking, my family might string several sentences together, rattling them on one after the other, in quick succession: "Law, the strawberries is gettin' real ripe over in yon field beyond the mountain there. Less us go pick some tomorrow early in the mornin' before the sun gets too warm. I'll make
me some strawberry jelly. Ye want to come with me? We can go together. I'll be by bright an' early in the mornin'." Therefore, I concentrated on enunciation, pace, and expression. I made sure that I retained the "ing" rather than dropping it, as many Appalachians are wont to do. "Runin', walkin', singin', and drinkin'," for example, became "running, walking, singing, and drinking." "Dun gone" became "has already left," such as, "The train's dun gone." "Ya'll" became "you all." The word "ain't" completely disappeared from my vocabulary.

I really had to pay close attention to such words as "either" and "neither." I remember a man in a subway terminal once laughed at me when, puzzled, he said, "I wonder why the train from Government Center hasn't arrived yet?" Helpfully, I replied, "I don't know, I've not seen it neither." Subject/verb agreements proved difficult: "We "wus" runnin' for the house 'cause the rain "wus" startin' to fall." Intransitive verbs such as sit, lie, and rise became nightmares as did the transitive verbs, set, lay, and raise. I avoided their use and chose other words in their places when possible. I thought carefully about the many multiple negatives running rampant throughout Appalachian speech: "I ain't never goin' to do that no more." Or, "Don't you never do that no more." I struggled over such colloquialisms as: "It don't matter none to me." "I ain't complainin' or nothin'." "You knowed you wouldn't suppose to do that." "The boy drownded when he fell in the creek."

Slowly, differences began to occur and when I went down home people took note. They commented on how I seemed to have changed. I talked different; I acted different. I lived in Boston, a city none of them had ever been to and most likely would never visit. As my years in the city increased, the intentional shunning of my speech and mountain ways continued and the changes became
easier. Except for the occasional mishap, using incorrect English, such as "ain't," saying "hare" for hair, or "arned" for ironed, I believed that I merged with the masses. I felt smug in the fact that few people, unless I told them, knew that I came from the head of Hogtrough Holler in far Southwest Virginia. Even so, I never stopped visiting the mountains and always liked going down home. However, while there I soon became bored and restless, anticipating my quick return to the city.

In retrospect, I am dismayed over my reactions to the many discriminatory actions and comments I suffered from outsiders when I first went to Boston. I did not realize then that the metamorphosis under which I thought I must go to endure life there would dichotomize my world and make it impossible for me to return to the mountains and be happy, at least for a while. Not being able to go home again I would never be fully accepted into the modern new world I once wanted to join so badly either (Barker, 1995). However, I knew in my heart that I still remained, and always would, an Appalachian by birth. Only now can I look back upon my early years as an "urban Appalachian" (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 16) living in Boston and understand peoples' attitudes towards me as a person.

Simply put, we misunderstood each other. I felt lost in their environment and forced myself to adjust; they did not know the one from which I came and had no interest in learning about it. Shallow and weak and not a good representative of my Appalachian roots, I caved in and decided to abandon my culture, one dating far back into a mountain people's history. In the process, I found that what I might have deemed stubborn survival appeared negative, arrogant, selfish, and ignorant to many of my fellow Appalachians. At the same time, both Appalachians and outsiders offered very little understanding or support for my struggle.
against the many exclusive, personal feelings of inadequacy, imperfection, unacceptability, and unfitness (Barker, 1995) I felt as an Appalachian.
Chapter 11

College---Entering the Impossible Dream

Near the end of my Coast Guard enlistment I became friends with Andy, a fellow from Gardner, Massachusetts. After completing duty on a Coast Guard cutter, his orders directed him to the base for final placement until his discharge. I got to know his family well and he often invited me to spend week ends at his house. He helped me to get my drivers license and we traveled some, visiting his relatives in Quebec and Montreal, Canada. One weekend he, another fellow from the base, and I drove down to Cape Cod. Another time, I took a leave of absence, flew to Florida where his mother and father had gone looking for a house, and helped him drive them back to Massachusetts. They hoped to live in Florida after retirement.

Andy introduced me to a girl with whom I developed a close relationship and we dated for a while. Using her car, she and I drove into the New England countryside on warm Sunday afternoons, traveling into Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. After my discharge from the Coast Guard, we kept in contact by letter, phone, or brief visits. But, eventually the relationship withered and died due to too much distance---Massachusetts, Virginia, and later, Florida---and the passage of time---summers, holidays, years.

Once, while visiting Fran on a Sunday afternoon, I continued to linger at her house even though the weather report kept predicting blizzard conditions. Finally, leaving for Boston late into the evening, I trudged through deep snow and fought the gusting winds all the way to the bus stop. The cold white fluff fell thick and heavy, icing my clothes and filling my eyes. I stopped occasionally and,
stepping into doorways, scraped the frozen precipitation from my face so I could see. Finally, I made it to the terminal only to wait for several hours on the late arriving bus. After boarding the crowded vehicle, the driver crept along the icy road through a thick curtain of fluffy white, making it to just outside Boston. There the motor coach came to a halt, stuck in a traffic jam. Immobilized by the slick roads, I sat all night with the snow swirling and piling deeper and deeper around the stalled vehicle. At daybreak, police paddy wagons nosed their way through the deep drifts. The rescue workers removed people from stranded trucks, buses, and cars scattered all along the freeway. They took me, and hundreds of other weary travelers, to a high school gymnasium for warmth, food, and drink. In the afternoon, I decided to walk to Harvard Square through the deep snow and from there catch one of the few subway trains still running the rest of the way into the city.

My association with Andy marked two major turning points in my life both removing me farther from my Appalachian roots. Denzin (1989) refers to such events as "epiphanies" (p. 70) and he defines them as "interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives" (p. 70). First, I began attending mass at an elegant Roman Catholic church. Soon, thereafter, I began taking catechism classes and converted to Catholicism. The church, big and ornate, with stained glass windows, a high alter, marble floors, gleaming crucifixes, booming organ, and several priests parading about in flowing and colorful robes snared my soul. The symbolic aspects of the ancient, elaborate, ceremony, dating back to the beginnings of Christianity, and often chanted in Latin, made more sense to me spiritually than any primitive religious service I ever witnessed in the mountains down home. The mass, regal, conservative, and orderly posed quite a
contrast to the sweating, pleading, hell fire and brimstone sermons of the uneducated, simple preachers from Appalachia. Today I wonder if the holy sacrament of baptism, a sign of my entrance into the Christian faith as a Roman Catholic, signified more for me than just a cleansing of my sins. I suspect the cool water dribbling over my forehead subliminally reinforced even further my exit from Appalachia.

Second, discharged before my enlistment expired, Andy began attending classes at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. In the meantime, his family retired to Florida but he wanted to complete his first year at the university. So, needing roommates to share costs, he, another student, and I rented a small studio apartment together. Therefore, I spent my last year in Boston as an apartment dweller, residing in a sparsely furnished flat on Peterboro Street. As my discharge drew near, Andy brought the far-fetched notion of my attending college to light. I consider this suggestion a "major event" (Denzin, 1989, p. 71), in my life for it happened to be one of the "forms of the epiphany" (Denzin, 1989, p. 71) which Denzin (1989) says "touches every fabric of a person's life" (p. 71).

At first I rebelled, presenting a list of reasons as to why such a scary endeavor appeared impossible. I vehemently protested, believing that only bright, smart people attended college. For certain, I did not see myself as one of those. Poorly educated and harboring resentment towards myself as an individual, education in particular, and my culture in general, I did not possess the correct social standing, attitude, skills, or mental abilities for college success. Public schooling, never coming easy for me, made advanced education, a harebrained notion at best. With poor reading, writing, math, and social skills, college seemed virtually unattainable, impossible, and, if I attempted to do such a thing, more than likely
embarrassing. I shuddered at the thought of enrolling in school and then flunking out. I held no intentions of making a fool of myself by pretending that I possessed the ability to succeed at a university.

Besides, didn't all colleges require entrance examinations, something that no one had ever suggested I take? Furthermore, didn't higher learning require evidence of proficiency in a foreign language? "Si," "Adios," "Buenos dias," and "Buenos nochas," the few Spanish expressions I remembered from high school Spanish classes, hardly made me an expert in the Spanish language. What about money? I had none for tuition or room and board.

For certain, when my four years in the Coast Guard ended I never anticipated attending college. Such a possibility seemed too far removed from anything I could imagine. Other, more sensible choices, seemed obvious. For instance, I could re-enlist in the Coast Guard for another four years. Or, I could go to northern Virginia and find a job in construction with one of my brothers. I could always find work in one of the local factories at home. But, Andy continued to encourage me and suggested that I move to Florida and attend college with him. That way he could help. He planned on transferring there himself to be near his family. So, because I had no other solid plans, had just recently visited Florida and liked its warm climate, and because I happened to be on the lam from Appalachia, I reluctantly decided to give college a try.

In retrospect, living in the city of Boston may have afforded another way for me to give up my Appalachian identity and to reestablish myself as a more cosmopolitan person. But, in all consciousness, the erosion of my Appalachian ways began in a discursive fashion many years before I ever went to Boston. It commenced innocently enough while watching the passenger trains speed by my
sister's house, with my first trip out of Appalachia as a child of six, and with each summer's work trip to Fairfax, Virginia. While in high school, it continued unintentionally as I made short visits to Baltimore, Maryland, Manassas, Virginia, and Cleveland, Ohio. The constant trickle of sisters, brothers, relatives, and friends out of the mountains only added to my desire for change. My boot camp experience, in an unpremeditated way, simply perpetuated the shedding of my old persona and aided in the cloaking of myself with a new one. But college, more than any other event, and totally unexpected, posed an opportunity for me to continue my exit from Appalachia, hopefully never to return.

After my discharge from the Coast Guard in June, I spent the summer at home. Then, in the fall I went to Florida and enrolled at St. Petersburg Junior College. A community school, it administered entrance examinations to new students but only to assess their strengths and weaknesses. No foreign language requirement existed and its low tuition rates, even for out-of-state students, seemed reasonable. Later, after a year, I claimed Florida residency by using Andy's home address where I lived until renting another house nearby. The tuition rates dropped even lower. Money from the G. I. Bill paid my college fees and living expenses.

I attended the first semester at St. Petersburg Junior College on academic probation because my old high school happened to be non-accredited. Probation meant that I must carry a "C" average. In addition, the entrance tests showed that I had a limited background in math, minimal reading comprehension skills, and poor writing abilities. The college counselor recommended that I take remedial reading, writing, and math before tackling any core subjects. However, I decided to forgo the remedial classes since Andy said he would help. They would
only prolong my stay at the college. Eventually, I did take a speed reading course during summer session of the next year. I hypothesized that, due to the high amount of reading being expected of me, such a course might force me to read faster and concentrate on the ideas rather than the words, thus improving my comprehension skills. It seemed to help. My reading rate increased and I began to understand more of the printed word. In addition, my vocabulary improved for one of the core elements of the course centered around the use of different words to express ideas. Moreover, the course foreshadowed a boon to my future major---English---a course of study for me not yet realized.

A throwback to my earlier years as a student wormed its way to the top while thinking about registering for classes. At Teas Elementary School years before, Mrs. Killgore, the teacher, recognized some of my successes with art. Consequently, years later, I decided to concentrate on something I felt comfortable with---art. So, along with the required courses, I took Drawing I and Design I. I still have some of the drawings I completed in those art and design classes (see Figure 16, p. 227a). I also registered for a typing course, something else I knew how to do from my yeoman experiences and high school. At the completion of the first semester, I managed to maintain a grade point average of 2.92 without taking any of the remedial classes, making only one "C" in government, thus satisfying my probation.

My success with the first semester boosted my confidence. I continued to concentrate on the arts---Drawing II, Design II, Art History I---working in the tougher required academic subjects such as sociology, psychology, science, math, government, humanities, and English composition. I still remember one old, tough English teacher. On the verge of retirement, often unpleasant and
Figure 16 - A drawing from art class
sarcastic, she taught me how to write. I still use many of the writing techniques she demanded in her composition classes. She repeated over and over, "Make a thesis statement and then back it up with examples." She returned almost every paper I turned in but pointed out where improvements could be made by bleeding all over them with a red pen and requiring that they be rewritten. She also taught grammar skills believing, she said, that all English students needed them since high schools weren't doing their job.

On only one occasion do I remember becoming really discouraged. The incident involved a final grade I made for a sociology course. Scared silly at the idea of talking to a college professor, I struggled along in the fourth semester class only to make a "D." Requiring memorization skills for objective multiple choice tests, I found the course difficult. The thought of failure sent me into a state of depression, dragging me back to painful, degrading memories of feeling "dumb" and calling up haunting recollections of unsuccessfulness as an elementary school student. In tears and ready to quit and return to the mountains where I belonged, Andy convinced me that a "D" may not be a good grade but it certainly would not end my college career as I thought. It simply could not be transferred out of the state of Florida to another school.

Relieved, I handled the "D" I made in a psychology class my last semester at the school much more stoically. It too, taught much the same way as the sociology course, required memorization for objective tests. In retrospect, my poor showing in only two classes, for someone who lacked confidence and an educational background disallowing success in college, seems phenomenal. For, in the end, I earned an Associate in Arts degree from St. Petersburg Junior College. Proudly, I walked in the graduation procession held at the St. Petersburg Civic
Center. With effervescent thoughts of success crowding my mind, an obscure black speck among hundreds of other junior college graduates, I marched across the stage to claim my diploma.

Before my confidence waned, I transferred to the University of South Florida starting the first summer session in June. My successes at St. Petersburg Junior College allowed me to think more deeply about another college diploma. Upon entrance to the university, I decided on my own to major in English. The anticipated heavy reading load, which Andy pointed out, did not discourage me. As a matter of fact, I tackled several English courses together. For example, in one summer quarter alone I took: British Writers, 1660; British Writers, 1780; British Writers, 1912; and, Current Novels. Then, in the fall I took: American Writers, 1865; Restoration 18th Century Literature; and, John Milton as a trio. Swamped with readings, tests, and papers, I still managed to make "As" and "Bs." I can't imagine why I decided to tackle so many demanding courses at once. Was it an effort to prove that I wasn't "dumb?" Was it a way to hark back and declare that my elementary and high school predictors might be wrong concerning my academic abilities?

Oddly enough, along with some sociology, astronomy, political science, and public communications courses I also enrolled in two classes for elementary education majors: Art for the Child and Arithmetic for the Child. The math course required that I work with children in an elementary school setting. Thus, my first encounter in working with young children involved aiding, twice a week, second and third graders in a summer program at a local elementary school.

Elementary education, as well as sociology, had earlier entered my mind as possible majors. Much later education became my chosen field. But then, my
passion for literature began to outweigh anything else and I took as many English classes as possible. Perhaps, subconsciously, I viewed English majors as smart and truly intellectual people, an elusive idea which I could only imagine for myself at best. Furthermore, English classes required an exorbitant amount of reading---an academic weakness with which I had suffered all my life. Maybe I wanted to prove to myself and the world that my reading problems weren't as bad as earlier predicted. Whatever the reason, I found the subject matter, subjective tests, and research papers required for these courses much more to my liking than memorizing materials for objective multiple choice tests. Academically, they tapped my thinking and reasoning abilities and helped me to express my thoughts and ideas through reading, writing, and discussion.

With such intellectual endeavors in the forefront of my mind, the end of my college life hurtled to its final conclusion. Successful at the University of South Florida, I graduated with a 3.08 grade point average and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the College of Language and Literature. As an undergraduate student at the University of South Florida and at St. Petersburg Junior College, I gained an unquenchable thirst for schooling. Indeed, the end of what began as a journey into the unknown, fraught with trepidation and fear, arrived more quickly than I wanted. As a final consequence to this educational trip, it preternaturally turned me into another person, one who could never, I believed then, return to Appalachia and be content.
Chapter 12
Home to the Mountains

The momentousness of my college degree came back to haunt me as I returned to the mountains of Southwest Virginia. Having depleted almost all of my money from the G.I. Bill, I had no other place to return except to the mountains of my past. Mom asked me to come home and stay for awhile. I did. After graduation in December, I traveled home to spend the rest of the winter. Yet I would soon learn that "return to the past and to the home often proves a painful one . . . not only because return is difficult, but because returning incites memories more anguished than pleasant" (Byer, 1991, p. 178). For some reason I didn't participate in the graduation ceremonies and can't remember why. I received my diploma in the mail. Perhaps I didn't have the money for a gown and graduation fees, or maybe I didn't have the nerve to experience the end.

For certain, with a college degree people noticed the changes in me like never before. My thought processes, speech patterns, vocabulary, and ideas all seemed to have shifted dramatically towards a more open minded, liberal, and more worldly way of thinking. Furthermore, I attended a church none of them understood; I came from a city many of them would never visit. However, in an odd twist of fate, it seemed that punishment for abandoning my roots and "getting above my raising" might be in the offing. For, with all of my education and as sophisticated, well read, and traveled as I had become, I could not find employment in my chosen field. Disillusioned, I found myself over qualified for most jobs. Besides, few career opportunities existed for English majors in Southwest Virginia.
To be sure, I probably didn't look hard enough for I really did not want to stay in Appalachia, feeling that I had outgrown the place. Besides I didn't own an automobile. Even a trip to town required borrowing a car or begging a ride with someone. How would I get to work? However, I did visit the superintendent of the Smyth County Public Schools. A former principal from my old high school, he told me that even with a Bachelor of Arts degree I must still have a teaching certificate in order to teach.

In need of work I found it in a Piggly-Wiggly grocery warehouse loading trucks for delivery to small stores scattered throughout the mountains. As an order came in someone in the warehouse loaded the grocery items---bags of flour, salt, sugar, meal---onto a conveyor belt; it wandered on supports throughout the huge building. My job included standing at the end of the conveyor belt, in the trailer part of the semi, and unloading and stacking the goods in an organized fashion on the truck. Humiliated by the experience, I quit after a week. The back-breaking, mundane labor didn't seem to match my English degree or even my experiences as a military clerk who had typed up orders for other peoples' destinies.

I went to Fairfax and worked for a day or two as a hod carrier. I loaded bricks onto a wheelbarrow, wheeled them to the construction site, and then delivered them on a hod to a bricklayer situated half way up the side of a building. Balancing the portable trough loaded with heavy brick over my shoulder, I climbed the ladder time after time, also making sure that the brick layer had enough mortar, mixing and carrying it in a bucket to him from a central location. Becoming sore and stiff, I had a hard time getting up after the first day, it being years since participating in such manual labor. I tried the excessively hard job for
a second day but decided that other less strenuous work must exist somewhere for someone like me. And so, grasping at straws, I went back home and soon thereafter applied to the University of South Florida again, hopeful that I might work on a master's degree, not in education, but gerontology.

Gerontology! Why gerontology---the study of the decline of life? Did it act as a metaphor for how I viewed my life at the time? Today, I can only imagine why the thought of such a degree came to mind. Perhaps it popped up because living in Florida had brought me into close contact with many senior citizens. I lived around them and had become close friends with several neighbors. One in particular, I visited often. Old and sickly, she had just recently relocated to St. Petersburg from Boston. Perchance greater reasons existed: I pined to be near old friends; I craved a return to academia; I wanted desperately to flee Appalachia. But, the university denied my application. Diffidence bullied me once again.

A logical question might be: Why didn't you just leave, go to Cleveland, Baltimore, Manassas, Fairfax, St. Petersburg, or Boston? Yes, I had visited all of those cities, knew people in them, and had grown accustomed to big city living. With an education, surely employment awaited me in such urban centers. Frankly, I can't answer the question as to why I didn't leave. As Barker (1995) says: "If I knew the answers to all my questions, I probably wouldn't still be writing, sifting, and sorting, working toward some acceptable personal understanding of just who I am" (p. 8). For sure, even with a college degree, I still lacked self-confidence.

Therefore, I began making excuses: I really hadn't earned my English degree; too many people had helped. The courses hadn't really been challenging; teachers watered them down because people entering college weren't as pre-
pared as they once were. The professors didn’t really think all those papers I wrote were very good; they just graded them too leniently. Certainly, home offered rest, comfort, and little stress. The mountains kept me feeling safe and protected from the pressures controlling the fast paced society from which I had just returned. Indeed, in Appalachia I seemed to be caught in an eerie time warp with no way of freeing myself. Did the culmination of my college years also include a cruel surprise, an ending to the outside world for me as a final reward?

Lacking self confidence, dissatisfied, disappointed, and restless, I left the mountains briefly in the form of a camping trip across the country the next summer. Andy and three girls, two of whom he had met as a graduate student at Florida State University in Tallahassee, and a third whom he and I both knew from undergraduate school, drove to Virginia. Picking me up, we traveled for over a month. I wrote about the trip for an advanced composition class I took years later at Radford University. The narrative account acts as one autobiographical sketch inside another. The story also serves as an apt description of the wanderlust I felt at the time and how dispirited I happened to be as an educated Appalachian disappointed with life. Too, it shows that often our childhood dreams can incomprehensibly come true.

I Saw America on Eighty Dollars

I had always wanted to take a trip out west, but, due to lack of funds, my plans always fell through. One summer four other people and I joined together and my trip became a reality. On the meager sum of eighty dollars, I saw America. The Badlands, Yellowstone, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon---these wonders, at one
time only dreams, became realities. The sights, sounds, and smells of these places, indelibly imprinted on my mind, will never be erased. You, too, can see America on a limited budget.

Because the trip would be a once in a lifetime experience, we five sought help in planning our route. The American Automobile Association (AAA) mapped us through the most scenic parts of the country. It took us through rolling hills, prairies, mountains, and deserts. The association's directions routed us northwest into Canada. From there, we traveled south, skirting the Pacific Ocean into California. In southern California, we headed east across the Mojave Desert. Two cities we particularly wanted to see included Las Vegas, Nevada and San Francisco, California. Therefore, it directed us through those two cities.

Our plans included camping in as many state and national parks as possible. On a limited budget, we felt such places might be cheaper. Many state parks offer free camping. Others charge a nominal fee, usually never over two dollars. The national parks charge anywhere from three to six dollars a night. However, we found that most of the larger well-equipped campsites, those with showers, flush toilets, and Laundromats, happened to be booked months in advance. But, the primitive campsites with pit toilets and water spigots seemed to be always available. We liked them better anyway. Fewer people wandered about and the night sounds---coyotes howling, owls hooting, wind blowing, leaves rustling, and streams flowing---could be heard.
To take care of our personal hygiene, we selected, on a rotating basis, campsites with showers. How did we manage to find them? Automobile associations and travel agencies offer booklets with state, national, and privately owned camping areas listed. They also state which areas have showers, what cities they are near, and directions to the sites. At the end of each day, we simply consulted our booklet and usually had no problem in finding a campsite that met our needs. We found it wise to stop early—around four or five—before the camping areas filled up, traveling approximately four hundred miles per day.

The next issue involved what equipment, food, and clothing to take. We bought no items other than food. We borrowed a tent big enough to sleep five people. Each of us had our own sleeping bag. We kept our cooking utensils to a minimum, a skillet, a pot, a can opener, spoons, knives, and forks—our only culinary items. Paper plates and cups set the table. We used our Coleman stove very little since cooking over an outdoor fire seemed much more enjoyable. We scrounged for wood where scavenging happened to be allowed even though wood could be bought very cheaply. An ice chest served as our pantry. Commodities such as Bisquick, peanut butter, Cremora, instant coffee, Tang, jelly, eggs, liquid butter, and bread would keep for days with no refrigeration. How could anyone survive a camping trip without beans? We ate a lot of those too! Food being cheaper in larger food chains, we purchased our supplies at shopping centers along the way.
Because we would be traveling through both hot and cold climates, our clothing consisted of various items—coats, jeans, shorts, shoes, and sandals. In small towns scattered across the country, we pooled our resources and did our laundry.

As for transportation, a Pontiac Ventura served us well. A luggage rack placed on the top carried our tent and sleeping bags; they took up the most space. In the trunk, we placed our cooking utensils and knapsacks. I agree! A car this small, transporting five adults, became rather cramped. We were ready to stretch our legs and rest after a long day's journey.

Any trip of this magnitude has its trials and tribulations. However, being amateurs, as we were, I think ours were few. We had no major car trouble. In Minnesota our carburetor needed cleaning and adjusting. In California, the thermostat stuck causing the car to overheat. Traveling at seventy-five miles per hour on an arrow straight highway, a sleeping bag flew off. Before we could retrieve it, a Mason-Dixon truck decorated it with tread marks. Because of our cramped quarters, tensions often ran high. This seemed to be our major complaint. I would suggest a much larger car—station wagon or van—for anyone planning such a trip. But, keep in mind, the larger the car, the more money it takes.

A full account of our trip would take pages. But, the following brief scenario gives some idea of what we saw and did. Leaving Virginia we traveled into Kentucky and then into Indiana. Rolling hills and corn fields seemed to stretch on forever. Eventually, the
corn fields gave way to wheat fields; the wheat fields gave way to flat, treeless plains. In South Dakota, we veered south into the land of the mighty Sioux. One hundred degree heat, no vegetation, tall pinnacles---transfigured, contorted, and crumbling from the ever blowing winds---this scene met us in the Badlands National Monument. The Black Hills of South Dakota with Mt. Rushmore greeted us next.

As we moved farther west, the sights became more spectacular. Moving on into Wyoming, we crossed the Big Horn Mountains, protruding like a sore thumb from the flat, treeless plains. Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Tetons---indescribable! We marveled at waterfalls plummeting hundreds of feet into seemingly bottomless canyons. The smell of rotten eggs from the sulfuric water fouled our nostrils. The gurgling sound of bubbling mud soothed our senses. Yellowstone's Old Faithful, one of the many geysers spewing steam into the air, surprised us.

We moved on into the Rocky Mountains and headed north into Canada where we visited Jasper, Banff, and Yoho National Parks. Standing by the shores of Lake Louise with the snow capped Rocky Mountains towering around me, I imagined them to be the Alps of Europe. We walked on a glacier left over from the Ice Age. And, in August, it snowed on the higher peaks.

Heading south, the Pacific Ocean eventually began to sparkle on our right. We drove through huge forests of giant Redwood trees, so tall they blocked out the sun. The Golden Gate Bridge led
us into San Francisco. Yosemite National Park, Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park, our route ran through them.

In Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park, the General Sherman tree grows. It is four thousand years old and towers two hundred seventy-two feet into the air, an awesome sight to behold! I walked there alone one morning just as the sun rose.

The Mojave Desert lay across our path. We crossed it into Las Vegas, a strip of neon signs lighting up the surrounding desert. We passed over the Hoover Dam and the Colorado River on our way to Grand Canyon National Park, the last major attraction on our trip. The feeling of standing on the rim of this mighty chasm, carved over millions of years, cannot be written into words. The earth seems to have cracked and at any time might fall apart. We rolled eastward, across the Navajo and Hopi Indian Reservations, the Painted Desert, Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, and home. After we returned, we totaled our expenses. They came to four hundred dollars—eighty dollars a piece.

In conclusion, with some planning, the wonders of America are as close as a person wants to make them. I never dreamed they would become so real for me. I endured some hardships; but, I saw America on eighty dollars.

While remembering that trip, my mind wanders far back into my past. I return in thought to my years as a fifth grade student when my teacher let me borrow her book of national parks. As a youngster, I vicariously visited them thinking that in reality I would never be able to go there.
After the trip, I stayed home for another year, at Mom’s urging. She somehow seemed to understand my desperation. I worked about the house, helped with the gardening and canning, cut wood, took long walks down well known country roads, across open fields, along rock fences, by rushing creeks, and into dark mountain hollows. I made short trips to St. Petersburg, Cleveland, Baltimore, Fairfax, and Manassas. I wrote poetry, several verses of which are found in this paper, and read numerous pieces of classic literature.

The following is only a partial sampling of the many books I read: Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson, To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee, The Three Musketeers by Alexandre Dumas, Taps at Reveille by F. Scott Fitzgerald, An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser, The Big Sky by A. B. Guthrie, Jr., Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee by Dee Brown, and Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy. I read just about all of Willa Cather’s books: A Lost Lady, O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, My Antonia, One of Ours, The Professor’s House, Death Comes for the Archbishop, and Shadows on the Rock.

Those days still haunt me as a time of sad, lonely, quiet, and discontented reflection. I felt lost. At the age of twenty-eight, I wondered what plans awaited me for the rest of my life. So, still caught between two worlds I wrote:

At summer’s end,
I walked through the dying fields,
a weakened sun beating at my back.
The milk pods exploded as I passed.
They ran, chasing each other before the wind.

A lonely buzzard floated high above,
captured on a steel gray sky,
spiraling, circling, gliding,
ever searching.

Spanish needles and beggars’ lice,
wretched things,
attracted themselves to my clothes,
followed me home,
and begged shelter,
from the approaching storm.

Such melancholic despondency has a way of calling up more troubling
considerations, those harbored deep within the dark shadows of an oppressed
individual's mind. alarmingly, such notions boldly crept forth from the darkness
and I heard ominous whisperings from:

Death,
the never-ending sleep,
pleading with me
to slip quietly away and
rest forever
in the peaceful white-black night
of somewhere else.

Floating,
dreaming,
all is calm,
all is bright.

Troubled spirit,
lonely soul,
ended.

You can watch,
not touch,
from this quiet,
dreamy place.

It
will become
your being.

Such morbid thoughts, captured on paper, frightened me and cognitively I
began to realize that survival, in the truest sense of the word, meant somehow
breaking free from the quagmire of self pity imprisoning me. In order to live, I had
to become involved in what Freire (1994) calls a "pedagogy of the oppressed . . .
the pedagogy of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation," (p. 35) of-
ten their very survival. Consequently, as one of the oppressed, I had to be my
own example in the struggle for my own redemption (Freire, 1994, p. 36). Thus,
serving as my own example of struggle, I began thinking about myself as an Ap-
palachian again---a good person.

Such a reflective turn gradually allowed me to accept the person I had be-
come through educating myself and experiencing outside worldliness. Accep-
tance, however, happened to be a complex undertaking. It involved understand-
ing that my education, personality, and experiences beyond the ridges, as well as
my Appalachian culture, had all mingled together to create a unique individual.
Too, understanding meant glorifying, recognizing, and reconciling myself with my
past, without shame or guilt. And, reconciliation included being receptive to the
idea that for me, my culture had helped shape me and there happened to be no
way of changing that fact and I shouldn't want to.

I had become what Garry Barker (1995) calls an "in-between" (p. 31),
"the last of a breed, the final generation to have intimately known [many of] the
old mountain ways" (Barker, 1995, p. 33). I remembered lowing oxen yoked to-
gether and moving through the fields, teams of work horses uprooting the rich,
black soil in the spring, hay stacked around tall poles in the meadows, wheat cut
and ladled with a scythe, noisy, dusty threshing machines rumbling before the
barn door, corn sliced off by hand with a corn cutter and bound into shocks, apple
butter bubbling on an open fire, hog killings, and handmade quilts all snugly and
warm. I had eaten foods cooked on a wood stove, stayed warm from the heat of
a flimsy tin heater, and recollected the stench from smelly outhouses. I had car-
ried brimming, sloshing buckets of cold water from the cistern. I had sipped fresh, unpasturized milk from Old Jersey and tasted her sweet, creamy butter.

But, I had lived in the outside world too and visited many cities and states, and even a foreign country. I had flown in jet liners, driven cars, ridden on trains, used telephones, and knew the luxury of clean heat and ready electricity, as well as water on demand, both hot and cold. Most certainly, I had experienced "higher" learning. As a result, life for me in Appalachia would never and could never be simple again. Such a bi-modal experience leaves one feeling misplaced, afraid of losing an idealistic, poetic, melancholic, and storybook past while wrestling with the inevitable push into the harsh realities of a futuristic, impersonal, and modern present.

Somehow, I had to fully comprehend and accept such dichotomizing ideas. For, in becoming an "in-betweener" (Barker, 1995, p. 31), I had also set a precedent by being the first from my family to attend college and the only male to graduate from high school (Barker, 1995). I happened to be one of those oppressed natives who had lived my life "with an ever-present message, sometimes subtle but often bluntly painful, that to be Appalachian is to be less than equal" (Barker, 1995, p. 39). Told covertly, and often overtly, by individuals and certain acquaintance to discard my beliefs, my accent, my ingrown ways, and my traditional concepts, and to cast aside my heritage and adjust to modern America (Barker, 1995), I struggled to do so. Now I began to "wonder . . . if I should have stayed put, lived out my life close to the source. Safe, sheltered. At home." (Barker, 1995, p. 195). But, I knew the answer, just as Barker (1995) did, that "I had to go out and see, sample, find out for myself how life worked away from the familiar, comforting acceptance of home." (p. 195). Disturbed by my depressed
attitude, my Appalachian pride, a result of my culture, and asleep for so long, awoke once again. It stalked about, slapped me squarely in the face and said, "You may not know where you are going, but you do know where you have been" (Barker, 1995).
Chapter 13
Beginning Anew

Conceivably, I had allowed my education to become an excuse for failure, forgetting "that human beings reflect, critique, and to whatever limited extent, make their own history" (Weiler, 1988, p. 153). When I began to think of my education as a way to deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of my world, (Shaull, 1994) changes began to occur. At length, as a result of my new awakenings and self actualizations, important "turning point moments" (Denzin, 1989, p. 22), "epiphanies" (Denzin, 1989, p. 70), and "significant others" (Weiler, 1988, p. 140) started to impact my life.

Attempting to start anew, I found a job. People with college degrees in English didn't work as common laborers in factories, did they? I did. I gulped down my pride and got a job in a furniture mill in Marion by not mentioning education on the application form. If factory work chanced to be my destiny, just as the old high school counselor had predicted, then amen. I stayed at the factory for almost a year sanding dresser drawers and packing furniture. Steady employment certainly felt better than no work at all. It provided a little money and kept my mind occupied too.

I could never describe the job as an exciting one but it certainly proved enlightening. Unrefined individuals worked in the plant, mostly women. They took great delight in pulling practical jokes. For example, they held no compunction about slipping up behind a man bent over his work and grabbing him by the genitals. They told vulgar, crude, racist, and sexist stories. Their minds seemed
to function around sex and sexual innuendoes. If they detected a weakness in another worker's personality, the individual bore the brunt of their merciless antics.

One of my co-workers, for instance, almost fainted at the sight of a rodent. On numerous occasions, someone slipped up behind him and placed a dead rat about his shoulders, on his work bench, or in his lunch box. Squeals of laughter rang out at his reaction when he discovered the dead animal. He danced around the floor, bellowing and squalling at some god-damned, stupid son of a bitch for bringing the disgusting rodent near him. I stayed busy and alone, not joining in on their cruel stunts, hoping they would ignore me. For the most part they did. I did become friends with an older gentleman and we had some deep and serious conversations about religion, politics, and the state of the world.

In the meantime, I kept looking for other employment. Eventually, an ad ran in the local newspaper for a lead teaching position at a Head Start Center in Marion. I applied for the job and they called me in for an interview. A group of parents conducted the question/answer session and hired me. Therefore, I became an employee of the Mountain Community Action Program, whose director, by the way, happened to be my old high school algebra teacher, the one who had humiliated me before the whole class. I mentioned the degrading experience to him once; he recollected none of the embarrassing episodes.

As a lead teacher at the Head Start Center, my second encounter in trying to educate young children, I taught pre-school youngsters more destitute than even I could imagine. Society might have changed dramatically since my younger days growing up in Appalachia but many of the Head Start children came from homes more impoverished than anything I could remember. In several
dwellings, no water, heat, or electricity existed. Abused or neglected, many by drunken fathers and mothers, the pre-schoolers often came to class dirty, smelly, and hungry, in tattered clothes and worn out shoes. They suffered from poor nutrition and little or no health care. Numerous children cried from aching, decayed, and blackened stumps for teeth, their diet consisting mainly of candy, soda, potato chips, and other junk foods.

I remember visiting a home to register a Head Start child once and came away appalled at what I saw. Rotten and loose lumber covered the front porch. Here and there the boards had caved in, leaving gaping holes in the flooring. A pile of loosely stacked cinder blocks served as the front steps. A battered, scratched, and grimy front door offered the only entrance. The smell of urine and feces hung like a heavy, thick blanket of decaying rot and useless stink over everything.

I rapped on the door and identified myself. Someone called from inside, and I entered a dark, damp, and smelly place. A dirty, ragged blanket placed over the only window eliminated any light. A cold chill filled the darkened room for apparently no heat existed; the electricity had been disconnected. As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I noticed stacks of old clothes lying here and there, the only indication of anything in the room. In a corner, atop a pile of old rags and other clothing, a small boy sat whimpering. I talked to the mother about family income, number of family members living in the home, and the birth date and age of the applicant while other voices murmured from a back room. Leaving the gloomy place as quickly as possible, I hoped the little boy would attend Head Start soon. He certainly qualified. Eventually, he did.
My experience as a Head Start teacher proved rewarding and I gained a great deal of satisfaction from working with such underprivileged youngsters. They responded well to my instruction. I read to them every day and helped them with their numbers. I worked with them on art projects and provided organized games and other activities. I soothed their hurt feelings, wiped their noses, and bandaged their bruises. I rocked them and hugged them. I fed them breakfast and lunch and taught them how to hold eating utensils according to the custom of the day, and how to brush their teeth afterwards. I showed them how to flush the toilet after each use and how to clean themselves. One little boy smeared feces over a bathroom stall once, and I made him clean it up with a pail of hot soapy water and clean rags. I took them on hikes through the fields and woods and on outings to airports, parks, and fish hatcheries. One such excursion involved an airplane ride. I made arrangements with the local airport for the bold adventure. The children loved it.

However, searching for employment which I thought to be more commensurate with my education, as well as a chance to earn more money, I left the Head Start teaching position after about a year and moved on to find another job in the same organization. A CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) counseling position opened up. I applied and the director hired me. During my stint as a CETA counselor I bought my first automobile, a Ford Maverick, because my duties required extensive travel, and finally, I made enough money to afford one. My job description involved finding work for low income teenagers and adults, placing them as janitors, library workers, or cafeteria helpers in public schools. They also worked as aides at Head Start Centers, groundkeepers for town governments, and laborers for forest rangers in the Jefferson National For-
est. State owned fish hatcheries in Smyth and Wythe Counties provided them work places as well. I remember an older lady, in her 80s, who acted as caretaker for a tourist cabin in Saltville. Stitching quilt tops while visitors watched, she answered their questions and offered them information on quilt making as well as the cabin's history.

Supervisors at work sites spread throughout Smyth, Wythe, and Bland Counties welcomed the extra help paid for by the federal government. I traveled to Chilhowie, Saltville, Rich Valley, Ceres, Rocky Gap, Bland, Wytheville, Max Meadows, Ft. Chiswell, and Austinville---towns and villages scattered throughout the three county region. Actually, I did very little counseling. I mostly signed up likely candidates by checking family incomes, delivered paychecks, and coordinated the workers, making sure they qualified, had adequate supervision, and that they met the needs of their immediate supervisors.

I worked as a CETA counselor for over a year and enjoyed my work very much. I made friends with several people at the program's headquarters in Marion and developed good rapport with my peers as well as the clients I supervised. But, I still didn't make much money. So, at the urging of an acquaintance, who also worked as a planner for Mountain Community Action, but who had been hired as the director for New River Community Action, I accepted a job as his Head Start Director in Christiansburg, Virginia. Mystically, it seemed, an inner voice said, "Take a bold leap." Blindly obeying, I moved to Christiansburg and found an apartment on my own, ironically within sight of the Montgomery County School Board office building. I worked for about eight months as a Head Start Director.
Dealing with financial matters, something at which I felt inadequate, made me feel uncomfortable, especially handling budgeted money from the federal government. Also, supervising Head Start teachers, some untrained and uneducated, required an expertise I felt I lacked. Furthermore, I oversaw Head Start Centers located in Christiansburg, Blacksburg, Pearisburg, Ironto, Pulaski, and Floyd. My heart ached for the poor children. Often removed from substandard houses in the morning, only to be placed in even poorer substandard educational facilities during the day, in many cases old, dilapidated buildings already abandoned by the school system, they returned to their decrepit homes in the afternoon. I disliked such financial and supervisory responsibilities and felt discouraged and unfulfilled in my job as Head Start Director. Again, as though being driven by an inner force in control of my destiny, I decided to gain certification as a high school English teacher.

In the meantime, as an employee at New River Community Action, and trying to find a meaningful career, two important events happened which changed my life forever. First, I met my wife Katy. She worked as the Director of Program Operations at New River Community Action and we met within the first three months of my moving to Christiansburg. Since our marriage, Katy's influence has affected me greatly. She has helped me gain a great deal of self-confidence by believing in me, supporting me, and loving me. Being the practical sort, I'm sure there must have been times during our many years together when she wanted to tell me to settle down and quit being so discontented, restless, unsure, and insecure. But, she hasn't. Even with a house and two car payments to make, and later, two children to take care of, she has simply said, "If that's what you need to do, we'll manage."
Our first date took place in early autumn. Warm and sunny, Indian summer enveloped the land. Katy and I drove to McCoy Falls on a Saturday afternoon and wandered along the New River. We sat in the gritty sand along the riverbank, talking and watching the splashing white water as it bubbled and tumbled over the rocks. Bouncing and swirling, like giddy lovers, the water rushed to the sea on a winding, watery path amid steep mountains dripping in color. The leaves, dying with splendor in their showy coats of rusty brown, bloody red, and buttery yellow, mingled with the splotts of beryline green splashed across the ridges. They whispered and rustled in the tepid air, chattering and dancing with sheer joy, it seemed, at our happiness, or perhaps reveling in their own sense of a one last chance at life.

Over the next year, Katy and I spent a great deal of time together. We attended many parties and went on several outings. I remember once, over the New Year's holiday, after a spat, Katy drove back from Floyd County late, on a cold and snowy night to be with me, because I asked her to. She had gone there to visit friends. She had wanted to move to Floyd County, but I said, "No! I've shoveled enough shit and snow in my life and lived far enough out in the sticks. Damned, if I'm moving to Floyd County."

That summer we took a camping trip along the North Carolina coast. We ferried to the southern end of Ocracoke Island and then made our way north, camping amid the ragged-edged, ever shifting, sand dunes along the way. The rushing wind poured over the grassy hillocks and brought the sound of the pounding surf and the smell of the salty air to our tent door. We basked in the hot sun like lazy lizards during the day. Then, as wandering nomads might do,
we moved from one camp sight to the next all along the wind swept Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

Announcing our engagement in November, we set our wedding date for May of the next year. In the spring, we celebrated a wedding Mass at St. Luke’s Catholic Church in McLean, Virginia where her family lived (see Figure 17, p. 252a). Surprisingly, almost all of my family attended---including my mother. The reception, held in Katy's mother's flower garden, took place amid the Chinese peonies, Shasta daisies, and Oriental poppies just coming into bloom. Later, we traveled to Ocracoke Island, the same secluded stretch of sand we had visited earlier, accessible by ferry only, off the coast of North Carolina. There we spent a relaxing week on the beach, in restaurants, driving around town, or biking out to the ferry landing. On our way to Ocracoke Island, we passed through Williamsburg, Virginia and spent a day or two rambling about the streets of the colonial capital enjoying the rose gardens. The thorny plants with their delicate flowers of red, yellow, salmon, pink, and white burst open and spilled into the sunshine, showering their sweet aromas. Returning to Blacksburg via Richmond, Virginia, we rented a small house on Tom's Creek Road.

In the hiatus between meeting Katy and marriage, I returned to school, the second event changing my life for good. Like coals sleeping under the gray blanket of a banked fire, Mrs. Killgore's kindness towards me as a struggling school learner so many years before never died. In a bizarre way, the embers flared up occasionally over the years, perhaps foreshadowing my career---public school teacher. Now, I often wonder: Is the spark lit by Ms. Killgore's tutoring session so many years ago the reason schooling, never far from my desires, yet seemingly elusive, became my passion? For, time after time, cryptically it seemed, I
Figure 17 - Newlyweds---Katy and Luke, May 27, 1978
returned to the field of education by dabbling in education courses or working with children in some way. Yet, painful memories of previous educational difficulties and hastily made predictions about my academic abilities still lurked in the shadows.

So, still leery of being rejected, since my disappointing denial for entry into the University of South Florida as a gerontology major, I registered for only one course—a philosophy class taught at night. After achieving success insofar as making an "A" in this session, I quit my job at New River Community Action and enrolled as a full time student at Radford University. What would I do for living expenses and tuition? I had been able to save some money since starting work; that would help. But, after visiting the office of Veteran's Affairs at Radford University, I found that earning my undergraduate degree in three and one half years, left me with extra funds from the G. I Bill. The Veterans Administration generously agreed to extend my stipend for another year too. Also, Katy still worked at New River Community Action.

At first, I planned on gaining certification as a high school English teacher only. More than likely, I reasoned, I had taken most of the courses required for such an undertaking. But, inexplicably, elementary school teaching appeared to be my lot. After talking to a career counselor at the school, I decided that I should get a double endorsement, one in English and one as an elementary school teacher—grades four through eight—making it possible to find work more easily in the teaching field. So, enrolling at Radford University full time, I eventually obtained a teaching certificate with two endorsements, high school English and elementary grades four through eight.
As a double major, I student taught at both Riner Elementary and Auburn High and Middle School. The principal at the elementary school liked my work and so before I graduated from Radford University in the spring he encouraged me to send in my application to the Montgomery County School Board. As a result, the principal hired me as a classroom teacher. Thus, starting in the fall of 1978, my career as an elementary school teacher began. For eleven years thereafter, I instructed fourth and/or fifth graders at Riner Elementary School. In the meantime, I continued taking classes leading to a Master of Science degree in Upper Elementary Education.

Having finished all my course work the summer before, I attended graduation exercises at Radford University in the spring of 1982. We gathered on Muse lawn in front of McConnell Library under a warm spring sun. I watched with mild interest as the professors all paraded in, noticing those whom I thought had inspired me. Silly thoughts cluttered my mind as I sat there, thinking: They look just like a flock of red wing blackbirds, all black with a few splotches of bright scarlet and yellow exposed. They seem a bit giddy. Why are they giggling and laughing so? They are not taking this a bit serious. This is just a party to them, a show. They think this whole ceremony is just asinine. These people don't give a shit who I am. They don't even know me.

I sat there with the other graduate students, sweating in my black robes, soaking up the sun, waiting my turn. The call came. Timed. Paced. Enunciated. "Luther Roy Kirk." One name among many. I walked across the stage, black robe billowing in the wind, tassel dangling. The bright yellow and red sash, signifying the College of Education, draped my shoulders and spilled down my back. I shook right hands awkwardly with the university president, his palm
sweaty and red. "Congratulations," he said. I took the diploma from his out-
stretched hand and immediately clutched it tightly to my breast. It was my symbol
of achievement. My prize!

Somewhere in the crowd, Katy, my wife, and our young son, Andrew, born
the year before, sat watching, along with Katy's mother and father. Suddenly, the
thunderheads huddled over the blue mountains and the green hills and valleys. It
rained that day, just as the ceremony came to an end, and just as it does every
spring in Virginia (Murphy, 1993). With the ritual over, I merged into the crowd,
and into my life, and into my classroom as an elementary school teacher. My
days at institutions of higher learning having come to an end.

Soon after I began as an elementary school teacher, Katy entered the
business school at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University as a gradu-
ate student. Also, within my first three years as a teacher the birth of my first
child took place (see Figure 18, p. 261a). After a very long and painful labor, on
Katy's part, Andrew was born. I wrote about the experience in his baby book:

November 2, 1981

Dear Andrew,

God! My shins are sore! Why? I stayed up all night helping
your mom through labor. Bending over that bed with my shins
against the bed railing happened to be just about all I could do.

Your mom did beautifully. She and I breathed together hoping that
you would soon arrive but to no avail. You were finally delivered by
Cesarean.

I was in a daze while they took your mom to be operated on
and it seemed an eternity until they came and told me that I had a
strapping 9 lb. baby boy. I was the first to hold and touch you. You were still covered with a yellow, cheesy substance when I went into the nursery and saw you for the first time.

I was mesmerized at how tiny you were and how beautiful. There were no scratches or flaws. I looked at you and wondered: "What did we do to create such beauty and perfection? Why was God so good to your mom and me?"

I looked at you lying there and thought: "This is my responsibility. I want so much for you Andrew. I want you to grow up to be healthy in both body and spirit. I want you to be both kind and considerate, have compassion towards others, be humble but at the same time be proud of who you are and what you are. Remember, God, in his wisdom, made you and sent you to us and we thank Him."

Your mom and dad love you.

I love you dearly,

Dad

I worried a great deal about having a son. I grew up without the presence of a strong male image in the home. In essence, I had no one to teach me about male things. But, even though I still worry about my son Andrew, soon to be fifteen, he is growing into a fine young man. He is sensitive and gentle, is "kind and considerate," and exhibits a great deal of "compassion towards others." I am most impressed with how tenderly he approaches life. I have seen him moved to tears over his team's loss, at being left out, the death of a pet, someone's leaving, hearing a sorrowful song, or the ending to a sad movie. At the same time, I have
seen him try things I couldn't imagine doing at his age. He swims, loves sports, has many friends, and plays the trombone.

Andrew's love for sports began almost at birth it seemed. He never cared much for trucks, cars, or dolls but spent hours playing with balls of any kind; he always wanted to be outside. Katy and I encouraged him in such endeavors. He possesses a dogged drive to achieve at being a good athlete. Not being the strongest, the biggest, or the best, he never misses a practice but often sits most of the time on the bench during a game, especially as he's gotten older, only to return time after time, hoping to be able to play. When asked if he wants to attend the next game, he'll say emphatically, "Yes! They might let me play the whole game this time Dad."

Indeed, I envision much of myself in Andrew and often it troubles me when I notice him struggling, just as I did, over certain areas of learning and dealing with life. I have often noted: Andrew works his heart out for those who respect him and give him attention; he quits for those who don't. He is much like me in that regard. But, just as I had the support of my mother, he has the support of both his mother and father and that makes the difference.

Both Katy and I completed our master's degrees and she found work in Roanoke. We left Blacksburg and bought our first house in Salem, Virginia. I continued driving back and forth to my teaching position in Montgomery County. Future plans included asking for a transfer to an elementary school on the eastern end of the county, closer to Roanoke. But, Katy applied for a job at Pulaski Community Hospital. Soon after, we relocated for a third time, buying our second home in Pulaski County. At the time, I held no desires for moving so close to Southwest Virginia. My need for returning to Appalachia had not yet come full
circle. Living in Pulaski only helped bring me back, closer to my roots, and I did not readily wish to fully reclaim them. I had worked too hard at digging them loose from the rough, rocky, terrain of the poor Appalachian soil. We planned on living in the area for no more than two or three years; but, this season makes twelve.

About six months before we moved to Pulaski, while still living in Salem, Maggie, my second child, arrived (see Figure 18, p. 261a). I include the baby book entry Katy wrote about our daughter’s birth here:

May 5, 1984

Dear Maggie,

We looked so forward to your arrival. Because Andrew was a Cesarean birth, we decided to have you the same way. So we knew about a month ahead of time the date of your delivery. It was a lot different with you because it was scheduled—but we were still so excited and anxious about you.

Your dad took me to the hospital the day before and stayed with me for several hours as we went through the process of being admitted. He then went and got Andrew so he’d be able to get some understanding of where I was. After they left, I spent the next several hours wishing it were the next day and I had already met you.

The morning came soon enough though and your dad came to the hospital at 6:30 a.m. Together we met in the operating room and shared the experience of your birth. For all the waiting that we did for nine months, the actual birth came so fast. All of a sudden,
the doctor was saying "it won't be long now" and then next "here it comes" to finally "it's a girl!" Your dad and I were both so happy you were healthy.

Dr. Bently took you and cleaned you up a bit and brought you over to us. You were so small it seemed—I guess that's in comparison to Andrew—but you looked so beautiful and we were so happy. After the surgery, your dad and I and you spent a while together just getting acquainted. We were so pleased and grateful. You immediately figured out how to nurse and spent a few minutes at that time nursing my breast. After about a half hour, the nurses took you to do your official measurements and to clean you up. Your dad and I went to my room and rested and called family and friends to tell them the good news. We were so pleased!

Your dad brought Andrew out to meet you that first day. He was a little impressed with the hospital and all the surroundings but was very impressed with you. Each day you'd come back to my room in the late afternoon and Andrew would come for a visit. Each day he was more and more impressed with you and by the end of the week, he was truly anxious and excited about bringing you home. On the ride home he kept talking about Maggie and her car seat.

Your first month at home has been a joy. You are a good baby, spending your time sleeping, eating, and looking around. You sleep a lot but in your few awake hours you are alert and curious. You are still so young and sometimes I find myself expecting more.
out of you—like a coo or a smile. But they will all come in time. I am anxious about your growing up and looking forward to your becoming more of a little person.

You are such a pretty baby. Without a doubt both your dad and I are so amazed at your beauty. Maybe its because you are ours, but we think you're wonderful. Welcome to our family. We're truly grateful to have you. And already we love you so much.

Love always,

Mom

Maggie, quick and smart, is much like her mother, someone whom I not only love, but respect. Maggie seems to learn easily and has always been independent and sure of herself. I remember several years ago when Sarah, our old dog died, Maggie stoically said, "I feel sad inside." Then, at the tender age of five, she set about making everyone else feel better. She looked at her mother, sobbing and heaving nearby, and with all the sincerity and wisdom of a five year old told her, "Mom, you need to put a brown paper bag over your head." Andrew, eight at the time, extremely upset, insisted that Sarah's soul had already gone to heaven. But, Maggie told him, "No! That can't happen! Sarah has to be buried first." To make Andrew feel better, she drew him a picture of a barking dog named Sarah going, "Aarf! Aarf! Aarf!" I later buried Sarah under the apple trees in our back yard.

Maggie loves dancing and gymnastics and her mother and I have encouraged her in those pursuits. She is also good at sports and has several friends. She too impresses me by trying things I couldn't imagine doing at her age; she just turned twelve. Maggie swims, plays the trumpet, and participates in dancing
competitions upon the stage before hundreds of people. Somehow I get a bit of personal satisfaction from seeing Maggie trade her soft ball cleats, dusty hat, and leather glove for leotards, ballet slippers, and stage costumes after each Saturday morning's softball practice.

To be sure, I worry about my daughter, as most fathers do, but not in the same way I worry about my son. Perhaps I notice the father/son relationship more since I grew up outside the presence of a positive male figure. But, I support the idea that a special bond exists between fathers and sons and mothers and daughters. I fear that fathers, through dominance, teach their sons to dominate and mothers, through submission, teach their daughters to be submissive. In addition, I hold the idea that fathers must model respect, responsibility, kindness, and goodness for their sons thus teaching them how to be accountable men and fathers just as mothers must do the same for their daughters. Certainly, none of this discussion centering on father/son/mother/daughter responsibilities has to do with stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity. Rather, it emphasizes the mutual respect both sexes should exhibit for one another as well as an absence of self-centeredness on the part of both men and women.
Chapter 14
To Become a Teacher

I don't know that I began teaching with any firmly established teaching philosophy, at least not one based on my own ideas and beliefs about teaching and learning. Essentially, because of my naïveté---artless simplicity towards education---my pedagogical practices seemed to hinge more on what I thought my principal's teaching philosophy demanded, rather than what I might have believed about teaching. Alarmingly, the harsher side of my Appalachian upbringing exposed itself as well through my abrasive discipline strategies. My father's voice came through. Demanding and tyrannical, I taught more out of a sense of organization and obligation to my principal, certainly not my students. I became a classic skills-based teacher and for years my daily lesson plans looked like the following, an actual lesson plan from my days as a beginning teacher:

Lesson Plans for: ____________________________

8:30 - 8:40 - Roll Call/Lunch Count
8:40 - 9:10 - Writing
   Check: pp. ____
   Work: pp. ____
Dictionary
   Check: pp. ____
   Work: pp. ____
Map Study
   Check: pp. ____
   Work: pp. ____
9:10 - 9:35 - Spelling - (Pretest on Wednesday. Test on Friday.)
   Check: pp. ____
   Work: pp. ____
9:35 - 10:00 - Music (On Fridays, switch with Reading Group 1.)
   Library - Thursday (9:35 - 10:05)
   Health - Tuesday/Wednesday
   Check: pp. ____
   Work: pp. ____
10:00 - 11:00 - Math
   Group 1
   Check: pp. ____
Homogeneously grouping my students based on principal and former teacher recommendations, as well as textbook pre and post test assessments, I covered basals, workbooks, and drill and skill sheets in a never ending river of paper work. I became a pedagogue, demanding my students work hard. We covered virtually every page in every book. I accepted no excuses. Pages not finished in class went home. If the homework did not come back as expected, in a raging voice I demanded to know why and made sure, sometime during the day—physical education, lunch, recess, field trips, or assemblies—that the slothful student completed the assignments. I even kept students after school. Un-
derstanding---of no importance; completion---top priority. In summary, due to ignorance, inexperience, and my submissive, while at the same time, harsh and straightforward Appalachian upbringing, my early pedagogical practices revolved around the completion of tasks, berating my students, and appeasing my principal.

However, gradually, over the next two or three years, as I blundered ignorantly about through mundane teaching practices and strict discipline measures, I became more and more disillusioned with such lifeless, methodical instruction. As a consequence, my own teaching convictions began to evolve. The first faint glimmers of my personal teaching philosophy started to kindle after the birth of my own two children. By watching my wife Katy interact with Andrew and Maggie, I began to think more deeply about my classroom behavior and about teaching and learning. Her strategies seemed to strike a chord with me. Coming from a different culture, she had been taught by reasoning, explaining, encouraging, and choosing; I had been taught through humiliation, beratings, and beatings, a dreaded fear I held for my own two offspring. In addition, even though I lacked sureness enough to mention such an idea aloud, I had started to mull over the following disturbing realization: I did not teach. Like a zombie, I simply organized groups and materials, went over directions, assigned pages, and then checked them, automatically continuing the boring cycle day after day.

Indeed, when my teaching philosophy began to emerge, and I started to recognize it as such, a dramatic need for change in my instructional program began to materialize as well. Hence, reflecting upon the apparent diminishing enthusiasm exhibited by many students for learning, especially reading, as they progressed through the grades, most particularly the students in my classroom, I
began to question the way I taught the subject. I went to my principal offering this insightful observation: If children reach fourth or fifth grade after having participated in a Chapter One remedial reading program since entering school and still lack reading skills, shouldn't I be doing something different through my reading instruction? Surprisingly, he agreed and without saying so, issued me a challenging dare: What are you going to do about it?

Having reached the point of being bold enough to reveal a tiny bit of my developing teaching philosophy, I suppose the covert summons of finding an innovative teaching strategy in reading forced me to draw upon knowledge with which I felt comfortable. Adventitiously, my background in English stepped forward as a way of approaching reading instruction. Gaining my principal's support, I decided to teach a novel unit to a small group of fifth graders comprised of six boys, all weak readers. But, what would I do for books? Not to be deterred, I knew that Scholastic, Inc. offered mass volumes of books to students at low prices. For each book sold, the seller earned a number of points. Therefore, utilizing the point system from the sale of Scholastic books to students in my classroom, I ordered enough copies of Call It Courage by Armstrong Sperry so that each child could have his own book to read and study. I selected the novel for no particular reason—or so I thought. Suspiciously, one of the book's major themes, struggle and survival in a hostile world, seemed to fit my small reading group's own literacy difficulties. Moreover, a repeat performance in an arcane fashion seemed to be materializing in my classroom, a flashback to one carried out many years before by Mrs. Killgore, my third and fourth grade teacher.

Unconsciously following my own instincts and remembering how some of my college English professors had taught literature, I aimed to create a low risk
learning environment for my students and to make reading as pleasurable as possible. Therefore, to reduce their anxiety about reading a book, which some of them had never done, I read a great deal of the story aloud to the boys using as much expression, emphasis, force, and enthusiasm as possible. They followed along with their own copies.

Occasionally, I called on a student to read aloud. But, I helped him with the words. I gave a term's meaning by discussing it as it appeared in the sentence, thus keeping the word in context. For instance, I might ask, "What do you think "irresolute" means in this sentence?" "The boy stood there irresolute and uncertain" (Sperry, 1971, p. 40). Often, as an act of discovery, I helped them re-read the sentences, phrases, or paragraphs surrounding the word in an effort to help them understand the word's meaning.

I made the text predictable by telling the students what the book entailed. But, to pique their interest, I had them predict too. I asked questions such as: Who is the main character? What is the problem? Who is the villain? How do you think the problem will be solved? Do you think the problem can be solved? I decided against using lists of vocabulary words, workbooks, drill sheets, or rigid discussion questions in my new reading instruction. I felt such teaching measures had produced minimal results before, and besides, I wanted to try something new. We, my students and I, just read and then talked about what we read.

Surprisingly I found myself mimicking the teaching strategies of teachers from my undergraduate English classes. I became overly dramatic while teaching. I paced the floor, wandering up and down the aisles, constantly moving, and reading all the time, but stopping and making interjections about certain passages when I thought appropriate. I laughed over funny sections. I changed the tone in
my voice when something mysterious or sad appeared to be in the offing. I quickened my pace at the climax. I slowed to a crawl when the mood became sad or lonely.

I progressively introduced my inexperienced readers to the elements of fiction—character, setting, plot, theme, mood, climax, and point of view—as well as imagery and figurative language such as personification, simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia, and alliteration. Emphasizing figurative language, for example, I suggested they visualize themselves lost on an endless sea when we discovered and discussed such descriptive passages as: "All around, as far as the eye could reach, were wastes of leaden water. The canoe was the moving center of a limitless circle of sea" (Sperry, 1971, p. 18). Or, I asked them to imagine what kind of person the sea might be, especially one with such warm, soft, and reassuring human characteristics described in this passage: "The wind from the sea swept up around him, its voice warm and soft and reassuring in his ear" (Sperry, 1971, p. 47).

I played upon the concept of character development and change and found the group of boys fascinated by the obvious metamorphosis in the main character, the young boy Mafatu, from a weak coward to a strong, brave hero. And, rather than completing a workbook page or skill sheet as a culminating activity for the book, I asked the group of boys to sequence the story through drawings. Dividing a poster board into six sections shaped like pizza slices, they drew pictures of the book's main events and then wrote short passages explaining each one (Jett-Simpson, 1981). I remembered the preceding activity from a workshop I once attended on effective schools and retrieved it from a dusty folder.
in my files. Finally, the boys presented their work to the whole class as an oral presentation.

My students' responses to this new reading strategy surprised me. At the completion of the book, the boys didn't want to return to the basal; they declared it boring after reading literature. They asked when we would be starting the next novel and where they could find copies of the one just read. Several students reported that their reading of the novel marked the first time they had ever read an entire book. Their enthusiasm spread and soon my whole class wanted to participate in a novel study.

Caught up in such a fervor of teaching and learning, I continued to abandon the basals and workbooks and began instructing the class as a whole. The students' excitement and the positive atmosphere in which I found myself caused my pedantic attitude to change slightly too. I thoroughly enjoyed my work and began using such phrases as, "We're all in this together and no one has all the answers, not even the teacher." As a consequence, I transferred, over a period of about three years, from a purely skills based, unhappy, demanding teacher to one of newfound freedom and excitement in teaching, as well as more productive classroom management skills, while at the same time experimenting with different strategies and teaching methodologies, especially in reading.

Fascinated with this contagious frenzy in my teaching and in my students' learning, I subliminally began taking note of what students' reading interests appeared to be by watching which books they selected for reading. A variety of topics seemed to amuse them—humor, mystery, suspense, survival, and animals—as well as the gross and nasty. Thus, my evolving teaching philosophy told me that perhaps reading instruction should center around such topics, a sub-
tle throwback perhaps to my days in sixth grade when I first found a reading topic I liked—early frontiersman trying to outsmart wily Indians. With this purpose in mind I began developing a reading program which I thought might more readily meet the interests of all my students.

As a beginning, at the start of each school year, I selected a short humorous book as an introduction to reading, feeling that if children were laughing, most likely they were comprehending. Laughing at something not understandable seemed virtually impossible to me. Also, I felt my students might covertly be getting the message that reading could be fun and that they could read a novel. Hence, as one of the first books in my developing reading program, I selected *The Twits* by Roald Dahl. It certainly kept the children giggling and twittering over Mr. Twit's nasty, dirty beard, Mrs. Twit's gross, glass eye, and the squirming plate of "wormy spaghetti" (Dahl, 1980, p. 15) that Mrs. Twit served up on a platter to her husband.

In addition, although *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White appeared to be relatively easy reading for most fifth graders, I found it to be perfect for introducing my students to the elements of fiction. So, after getting them hooked by using a short humorous book, I presented the world of literature to them by calling upon my English background once again and teaching through the characters, settings, plots, themes, moods, climaxes, and points of view found in *Charlotte's Web*, as well as its other "devices of style" (Lukens, 1976, pp. 117, 118)—personification, simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia, alliteration, figurative language, and imagery.

Thereafter, I casually mentioned these components over and over throughout the teaching of all the novels. But, I never overly emphasized them through segmentation or teaching them as explicit concepts. I wanted my stu-
dents to enjoy the story without getting bogged down with such literary terminology. For example, through dialogue intermingled with oral reading, I introduced the literary elements of the material under study, concentrating particularly on character development, plot, and theme. I asked such questions as: Who is the main character? List some of his or her character traits. What sequence of events has gotten this character involved in a conflict? Can you give me an example of a theme which might be developing with this story?

I pointed out figurative language by stopping and interjecting such information when I came across the examples while reading, or when I thought appropriate. For instance, taking a passage from Charlotte's Web, I couldn't dismiss such vivid language as "a little maple tree in the swamp heard the cricket song and turned bright red with anxiety" (White, 1952, p. 75) or "he gulped and sucked, and sucked and gulped, making swishing and swooshing noises, anxious to get everything at once" (White, 1952, p. 114). With such phrases I might ask: "What has the maple tree become? These words all sound like their meanings. What's that called?"

And then, gradually working into more difficult books, I chose those with multiple plots and themes, many complex characters with a variety of problems, and harder vocabulary words. For example, in Julie of the Wolves, by Jean Craighead George, the students fretted and stewed about the main character, Julie, while at the same time being repulsed by her necessary survival skills. She must learn to communicate with the wolves and eat the regurgitated food they brought her for survival. They were horrified and saddened when Amaroq, the wolf leader, and Julie's friend, dies at the hands of airplane hunters. She suspected her father, a hunting guide, might have been instrumental in the wolf's
death. Irresistibly, I pointed out such colorful phrases as "all through the sunny night she waited" (George, 1976, p. 25) or "he was like water and slipped through her hands" (George, 1976, p. 34). On reading such passages, I might declare: "How could a night be sunny? How could an animal be like water?"

As we progressed through the readings, I found my students spellbound with the mystery and suspense surrounding Little Jon in Alexander Key's *The Forgotten Door* and Little Bear in *The Indian in the Cupboard*, by Lynne Reid Banks. When both characters mysteriously returned to wherever they came from, my young students seemed visibly moved. Appalled at the deplorable conditions on the slave ship portrayed in Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer*, they were repulsed by the stench from body sweat, diarrhea, vomit, and death issuing forth from the slave hold. The antics of the Herdmans in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson (1972) made the students roar with glee. Other complicated books read during the course of the year included: *The Black Pearl* by Scott O'Dell; *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor; *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth Speare; and, *My Brother Sam Is Dead* by James Lincoln Collier & Christopher Collier.

Ironically, many of the books I chose for study seemed to stem from my own Appalachian culture. For example, such early influences appeared boldly evident in Alexander Key's, *The Forgotten Door*. The Appalachian setting, the isolated mountain cabins, the clannishness of the people who lived there, their fear of the unknown, and their paranoia towards outsiders, were all phenomena helping to shape my life history at one time.

Likewise, a part of my life history showed up in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson. The characters, Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude,
Ollie, and Gladys Herdman boasted personalities much like many of the children who once attended my old school, Teas Elementary. Too, I knew several children in my community just about as rough, unkempt, and unruly as they were. Furthermore, just as the Herdmans did, I participated in a Christmas pageant every year at our little country church.

Another book which I used in my classroom and which reflected my Appalachian culture and life history included, *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree* by Gloria Houston. Perennially we had a Christmas tree at our country church and school. Sometimes we cut a fragrant cedar; other years we cut a pine. Angels, shepherds, and kings appeared every year too, and especially Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. Yes! Even in school!

In addition, the book *My Great-Aunt Arizona*, also by Gloria Houston, mirrors a life story from my Appalachian past. This book reminded me of the country school I attended, especially the teachers who seemed to have taught there forever. I can still see and hear Mrs. Ruth Stamper: She speaks with a high pitched voice; her hair is "wound 'round her head;" (Houston, 1992) and, she reads us a story as she rocks a fretful first grader on her lap.

Finally, one of my most favorite books tying my life story as a child in Appalachia to my classroom is *When I Was Young in the Mountains* by Cynthia Rylant. This simple autobiography written from a child's perspective reads like visiting family and friends through the pages of an old photo album. The author's fond remembrances of her early life in Appalachia seemed much like my own, simple but somehow wonderful.

Assessment of my students' reading progress took an openly subjective stance. I mostly judged their successes by the obvious joy and excitement they
revealed concerning their renewed interest in reading. All students, even weak readers, wanted to read novels and acted as volunteers, begging to read passages aloud before the whole class. I heard such phrases as: "Reading is fun! I can't wait until we start the next book!" However, I did work with them in a collaborative effort at writing summary paragraphs at the end of the novel. Too, I assigned group or individual writing or art projects to help the students put their thoughts on paper. Such assignments centered around questions much like the following, which I typed on index cards and passed out to individuals or groups: Would you choose the main character to be your friend? Why? Why not? Is there any way in which the characters changed during the story? How? What new things did you learn from reading this book? Explain. Is there any part of the book you would not agree with? How? Why? If you were to paint a picture of the setting, what would you include in your picture? Do so (Raimo, 1982).

Assessment also came from outside reactions to the way I taught reading. I don't recall dealing with any disgruntled parents over my instructional program. However, this had not always been the case. As a beginning teacher, parents had often complained to me, and to the principal, about my harsh and demanding classroom manners. Many avoided putting their children in my classroom; now, they requested they be placed there. With pride yet hesitation, I accepted offers to present my work at conferences held by the New River Valley Reading Council and the Montgomery and Washington County Public Schools.

New Strategies in Teaching

During my transition from skills based teacher to literature based teacher, I continued to present other courses of study much as always to my students. I say literature based for I never fully adopted the whole language philosophy of
teaching all subjects as a whole, without segmentation, without isolating them as separate pieces of knowledge. I agreed with such a concept but trying to meaningfully integrate reading, writing, listening, speaking, creating and thinking with other content areas utilizing experiential background/discovery learning seemed much too complex and unnecessary. Therefore, easier to manage and teach through demarcation, I believe I became a content area reading teacher, continuing to segment the instructional day into blocks of time for writing, spelling, English, math, science, and social studies. Even reading had a scheduled time slot.

Meanwhile, my principal encouraged me to take administrative courses because he believed I might make a good principal. I took his advice and added a principal endorsement to my teaching certificate. Also, I continued taking graduate level courses for teaching certificate renewal. One of those classes in particular, held at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, had a shrewd and lasting impact on my classroom teaching practices. The professor for “Teaching Reading in the Content Areas” demonstrated many of the strategies discussed in the textbook required for her course—Content Area Reading by Richard T. and Jo Anne L. Vacca. Influenced, I found myself returning to my classroom and experimenting with my students. I used many tactics: structured overviews, directed reading-thinking activities (DR-TA), three-level reading guides, SQ3Rs, KWLs, word sorts, word analogies, and magic squares. Then, my teaching took on an exploratory tone. In other words, I experimented, using my students as subjects, watching their reactions, and gauging their learning by taking mental notes and collecting examples of how they seemed to improve in their ability to discuss topics, write paragraphs, or take tests.
I started using structured overviews for just about every subject I taught. Invaluable, I found these graphic organizers helped students, and me, anticipate concepts and their relationships to one another in the reading material, when key, technical, relevant terms, important to the idea under discussion, were displayed and arranged in such a manner (Vacca and Vacca, 1986). Such visual webs of information taught the children how to prepare thorough notes and how to write elaborate, complex, and technical paragraphs by simply recomposing the key concepts into complete sentences. The following, from a lesson plan I taught on Charlotte's Web, centering around the literary element "theme," acts as a simple example:

- literature
  - theme
    - main idea
      - two types
        - explicit
          - clearly stated
        - implicit
          - not clearly stated

makes comment about society, human nature, or the human condition

My students' ability to compose complicated paragraphs from structured overviews amazed me. A student written paragraph, constructed by using the preceding graphic organizer, and either worked out as a class or group project, and then kept in a notebook for future reference, might look like this:

In literature the theme is the main idea of the piece of writing. There are two types of themes. One is explicit; the other is implicit. An explicit theme is clearly stated. An implicit theme is not clearly stated. Themes make comments about society, human nature, or the human condition.
I used the directed reading-thinking activity (DR-TA) for teaching short stories. Copying literary works from old books, I cut them apart at conflicting points, read the sections aloud piecemeal to my students, and asked them to predict, verify, make judgments, and to think about the selection. I utilized such morbid, mysterious, nervous, and exciting short pieces as: "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe; "The Most Dangerous Game" by Richard Connell; "The Return" by Lord Dunsany; "Blow Up with the Brig!" by Wilkie Collins; or, "The Monkey's Paw" by W. W. Jacobs.

Three-level reading guides, directing readers through interlocking levels of comprehension---literal, interpretive, and applied---proved extremely worthwhile for all subjects (Vacca and Vacca, 1986). I not only used them for reading, social studies, science, and health, but math as well. I heterogeneously divided the children into four or five cooperative learning groups making sure that each pod had what I considered a smart, a weak, and two students in between among them. Afterwards, we checked the guides as a whole class, often raising deeper discussion questions, especially during the interpretative and applied levels.

Note the following three-level reading guide I once wrote for solving a word problem in mathematics:

Problem: Rose sold 23 tickets for a concert. If each ticket cost $18, how much money did she collect?

I. Right There: What did the material say?

Directions: Check each statement you can find in the problem.

____ 1. 23 tickets were sold.
____ 2. Rose collected $18.
____ 3. Rose lost 23 tickets.
____ 4. Tickets cost $18.
II. Think and Search: What does the material mean?

Directions: Check each true statement.

____ 1. I must use the operation of multiplication.
____ 2. This is a nonroutine problem.
____ 3. I must use a guess and test strategy on this problem.
____ 4. This is a routine problem.

III. On Your Own: What is the answer?

Directions: Check each item with which you agree.

____ 1. I must choose an operation to solve this problem.
____ 2. The operation is addition.
____ 3. 23 X 18 = 414
____ 4. $18 \times 23 = $414

SQ3R, an acronym for Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review (Vacca and Vacca, 1986) and KWL, standing for "what I Know," what I Want to know," and what I Learned, are two techniques I experimented with in all subjects. To illustrate, a lesson in social studies might be handled in the following manner. First, I helped the students Survey the material, developing a general outline for organizing the information and raising Questions, expecting to find answers in the material under study. Next, I helped them Read, either quietly or as a group, seeking answers to the previously formed questions. Then, I helped them Recite, answering orally, or in writing, the aforementioned queries. Finally, I helped them Review. We reread the material verifying answers (Vacca and Vacca, 1986).

In science, I might use a KWL to teach about fish for example. Splitting the chalkboard, or a large piece of chart paper, into three parts, I labeled the sections KNOW, WANT, and LEARN. I then asked them: "Tell me what you already KNOW about fish." Then, "What do you WANT to learn about fish?" Finally, af-
ter I taught the lesson, "What did you LEARN about fish? I found this method of teaching acted as a quick assessment tool as well. Furthermore, I expected my students to keep notebooks on all information discussed through SQ3Rs and KWLs.

Word sorts, word analogies, and magic squares, I mostly used for spelling lists. For instance, I might ask the students to form small groups, or I might work with them collaboratively, and then ask them to divide their spelling words into different categories. Too, I might give them several headings of my own creation and ask them to sort the words accordingly (Vacca and Vacca, 1986). Word analogies I made up by using the student's spelling words and following the guidelines suggested by Vacca and Vacca (1986). They list the common types of analogies as: "part to whole, person to situation, cause and effect, synonym, antonym, geography, measurement, and time" (p. 317). Finally, I followed Vacca and Vacca's (1986) suggestions for creating "magic squares" (p. 324). Using an activity sheet with two columns, one for content area terms labeled with a letter and one for their definitions, or other distinguishing statements, labeled with a number, I asked the students to match the terms with their definitions, putting the number of a definition in the proper space denoted by the letter of the term in the magic square answer box. If the terms and definitions matched correctly, a magic square formed, a numerical total being the same for each row across and each column down the answer box—the magic square.

Changing dramatically as a teacher during my eleven years at Riner Elementary School, parents, students, and administration, for the most part, reacted positively to my teaching methods. To be sure, a few parents still felt that I demanded far too much from fifth graders; a few youngsters cried at the sheer
thought of being placed in my classroom; their parents requested that they be placed elsewhere. Subconsciously, I suspect, I wanted no one to feel incapable, as I had been made to feel, but in the act of carrying out those desires, demanded too much, forgetting that often students, coming from many diverse backgrounds, react differently to stress. Most parents and students, however, described me as being challenging and hard, and told me so. Supportive parents often said that my attitude towards their child conveyed the message that I wanted them to succeed and that I wouldn’t let them fail. They appreciated the fact that I made their children think deeply and work through difficult tasks to completion.

I often think about my past fourth and fifth grade students. As their teacher, I just assumed that most of them would go on to graduate and find work or attend college, making it in the great American scheme of things. I believe many of them did in some way or another. For example, most years I receive invitations to attend the high school graduation ceremonies of former students. Some attend Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; I run into them occasionally on campus and we stop and chat as adults. Others attend New River Community College or Radford University.

One of my early pupils now works as an elementary school teacher in Montgomery County; another teaches at the middle school level. Recently, I just read the wedding announcements of two young ladies, sisters, both students of mine. They attended prestigious colleges. One married a doctor; the other a professional golf instructor.

Not always the best as a teacher, I subtly, but reluctantly, received the message from one of my students once that I should ease up on the number of
math problems I assigned for homework every evening. She told me that she wrestled with nightmares all night one night while dreaming about her math book chasing her down the road open to the chapter on long division.

At other times I lashed out at my students, admonishing them publicly and severely for late assignments or what I thought to be inappropriate behavior. I didn’t care and didn’t want to listen to their excuses. They had violated my rules and I resented it. I had high expectations and if they didn’t perform then they suffered.

I remember one incident when a child would not stay seated. He insisted on standing and constantly rose from his chair and worked with his back bent over his desk in an awkward position. I chastised him severely and demanded time after time that he sit. At one point, I walked over to him and took his chair away telling him that if he insisted on standing then he didn’t need it anyway. As a ghastly reminder of boot camp. I threatened to make him carry the chair around with him when he went to the cafeteria for lunch, outside to play, or to the library. Only later did I find out that he could not sit because of bruises left on his back, legs, and buttocks from a whipping with a leather belt.

In another incident I had a child in tears and afraid to come to school. State projects happened to be due, as they were every spring. The child and her parents thought sketching maps of all fifty states and writing a short paragraph on each one, along with other drawings and facts, seemed much too demanding.

I know former students who dropped out. Some married; some just quit. I see them occasionally working at McDonald’s, Kroger, or Hardee’s. A few got pregnant while in high school. I talk to them on the streets or in stores and ogle

280
and ah over their babies. Some enrolled their children in classes at the elementary school where I became a principal.

Others have been sent to prison or spent time in jail. I read about them in the newspaper and think, "Why didn't I do something for them back then?" Even in fourth and fifth grade, we just knew. They were castigated verbally in the teacher's lounge and between colleagues. I can hear the waggle of tongues now: "Johnny almost killed me today!" "We'll read about him some time in the newspaper." "He'll commit murder and end up in prison."

I know one of my students who didn't make it at all in this hurly-burly, desensitized world in which we live. Several years ago, around my son's birthday in November, and late into the evening, I received a somber phone call. The voice on the other end said in a very hushed tone, "You probably won't remember me but my name is Mary Olver. You taught my son in fourth grade." The voice continued, "You were the best teacher he ever had and I never told you. He used to talk about you all the time. He thought you were wonderful because he said you were the only teacher who had ever cared about him. I wanted you to know how much he liked you and what a difference you made in his life."

She began to sob, "A train hit Jeremy last year and killed him. This is the anniversary of his death. I don't know whether you remember or not but your son was born on Jeremy's birthday. He got so excited that year when the principal announced over the public address system at the school that your boy had been born. He was so pleased that your son was born on his birthday."

Stunned, I didn't know how to respond to this sad woman sobbing on the other end of the receiver. I somehow stammered through my sorrow at her loss. Finally we were able to chat for a few minutes. I remember saying to her, "You
know I had to be very hard on Jeremy. He didn't want to work and I made him work as hard as anyone else. We went round and round almost every day. He always did something to annoy me or the other students, or found creative ways to break the rules."

She said, "I know you were hard on him but you were the best thing that ever happened to him and he would tell you if he were here today. That's why I had to call. I had to let you know how much you meant to him. I never told you at our last conference."

I remembered Jeremy. I held many conferences with his parents over the course of the year he sat in my class. Bushy-haired, mischievous, and incorrigible, a little boy, I kept him sitting in isolation for much of the year. I positioned his desk in the corner between the file cabinet and the wall. I could see him and he could see me, the chalkboard, and the overhead. As a bright student, which he and I both knew, I wanted him to miss nothing as I taught.

I restricted him to the small bathroom near my teaching area because he misbehaved in the big bathroom down the hall. He scribbled graffiti on the walls; he stuffed whole rolls of toilet paper down the commode to make them overflow; he crammed wet paper towels into the sink and then left the water running full blast; he threw soaked gobs of toilet paper upwards so that they hit the ceiling with a splat and dried there in a nasty gray blob; and, he raised the ceiling tile and attempted to climb into the loft. Even his restricted stays in the small bathroom did little good. He urinated on the heater so that one whole end of the school reeked of a putrid, musty, acidic smell. Pulled out of my class for an hour or two each day as a special education student, peace and quiet reigned during his absence.
After he left my classroom, he came back to visit year after year. Many times when the school became quiet and all the children had left I looked up from my desk to see Jeremy peeping playfully over the rim of a mobile chalk board or cupboard. I remember one of the last times I saw him. He had designed his hair in an interesting pattern. Wide "V" shapes, tiered one after the other, had been clipped into the back, pointing downward toward the nape of his neck. "I'm making a statement Mr. Kirk," he said.

Jeremy, always willing to take chances, break the rules, and struggling to fit in, drank with his teenage friends and played chicken on remote sections of railroad track in Montgomery County. He dared sit on the steel rails while charging locomotives bore down upon him, their whistles howling. The trains came to within a few feet of the youngster before the daredevil turned chicken and jumped. Hit by a freight train loaded with tons of coal, Jeremy waited much too long.

I often ponder over all those things I could have done, or should have done, as a teacher to help children who we all felt might be predestined to fail for:

Children who question, who do not accept uncritically the things they are asked to do by their teachers, are not necessarily bad students or troublemakers. . . . they are young people whose minds have not been seduced into conformity and whose wills are not broken. If you can reach these creative and intelligent students, you have done . . . "a job of work." (Kohl, 1988, p. vii)

The awful truth is, many times I didn’t know how to reach such students. Did my fallibility as a teacher encourage students to fail, to drop out? Did my classroom become a form of injustice for some students? Did I readily accept the
idea without question that some children were destined to die, go to jail, or attend college because that's just the way things turn out? Was I really the best thing that had ever happened to Jeremy? What more could I have done so that he would be alive today? Did I really do a good "job of work?"

**Teacher as Researcher**

As time progressed, the principal, my friend and mentor, retired. After his departure, I taught one more year at the school under the new principal who too supported my work. Eventually, I would return to graduate school but it seemed only natural, considering the exploratory turn my teaching had taken, that ultimately my path wandered into the research realm. On a suggestion from an adjunct faculty member from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, who had visited my classroom and witnessed my work, I submitted a proposal to the Virginia State Reading Association entitled "The Use of Novels in the Teaching of Reading." As a result, I received a teacher/researcher grant to study reading as I taught it to my students.

Being a neophyte researcher and ignorant of the complexities surrounding such an undertaking, I needed guidance with the project. The researcher from the university agreed to help. She assisted me in carrying out the individual interviews conducted with the focal students before the project began, after each day's lesson, and after the completion of the project. This allowed me to contend with the rest of the class. She also helped in transcribing the audio taped interviews and daily lessons—an overwhelming task. Furthermore, she and I discussed together three research questions which would guide the project.

I include the particulars of the reading research project here for, needless to say, I learned a great deal from participating in such an adventure, not only
about the complexities surrounding such an inquiry but about the enthusiasm my students seemed to have for studying novels as opposed to basal readers.

The Use of Novels in the Teaching of Reading

My investigation into "The Use of Novels in the Teaching of Reading" centered around three proposed questions: How do children feel about reading instruction before engaging in a literature based reading program? What did the students learn in this literature based reading class? How do children feel about reading instruction after reading novels? The methodology used, which the university researcher and I explored together, focused on: carrying out the project, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and, looking at the results, centering on the three hypothesized research questions.

Carrying Out the Project

The participants for carrying out the project were my heterogeneously grouped fifth grade reading class of nineteen students at the elementary school where I taught. In addition, I selected four students, Roy, Jason, Amy, and Beth, for closer analysis. Two of the four students, I considered successful school readers. In other words, they could read fluently, exhibited good comprehension skills, and did not qualify for Chapter One reading assistance. According to their fourth grade standardized test results, Roy scored in the 93rd percentile for reading comprehension; Jason scored in the
69th percentile. Both consistently made the school's A, or A/B, honor rolls.

The other two students I considered less successful as school readers. They exhibited some difficulty with pronunciation while reading and at times were unable to respond correctly to comprehension questions. One of the students, Beth, had attended the Chapter One remedial reading program up to fifth grade. Standardized test scores for fourth grade reading comprehension revealed Amy scoring in the 57th percentile and Beth scoring in the 32nd percentile. Amy consistently made the school's A/B honor roll.

**Data Collection**

Before the project started, we conducted background interviews with the four focal students. We asked them the following, pre-formulated, questions:

1. How were you taught reading prior to fifth grade?
2. What kinds of books did you read in reading class?
3. What things were taught to you in those books?
4. What did the teachers do to teach you reading?
5. Where were you seated during reading class?
6. What activities did you do while in reading class?
7. How did you like reading before you read novels?
8. What did you like or dislike about the way you were taught reading?
9. When did you first learn to read?
10. What did you like best about reading?
11. What did you like least about reading?
12. What are reading skills?
13. How did you learn reading skills in past classes?
14. How did you feel about reading?
15. What books, if any, did you read outside school?
We felt these interviews allowed us to tap into the students' feelings about prior reading experiences before reading novels. As well, we hoped to get a feel for their attitude towards reading. Furthermore, we wanted to find out about their perceptions concerning reading instruction in previous years. For example: Did they remember what kind of activities they might have participated in as early readers? Could they remember their seating arrangements? Did they know whether they had been grouped according to ability? We wanted to find out what books they used while being taught reading, and when they first learned to read.

After the background interviews, I provided each student with a copy of Jean Craighead George's award winning novel Julie of the Wolves to be read while the study progressed. The university researcher observed and audio taped each day's lesson and kept field notes. I also kept a journal for reflecting upon the daily lessons.

As part of the data collection, immediately after each day's reading instruction, we conducted brief interviews, three to five minutes, with the four focal students. The daily interviews centered around the following questions:

1. What did you do in reading today?
2. What were you thinking during reading today?
3. What do you remember about the novel?
4. Which part of the book did you like best? Why?
5. What has the novel been about up to this point?
6. Why do you like or dislike this novel?
7. What did you learn today in reading?
8. What kinds of skills are you learning from novels?
9. What are reading skills?
10. What reading skills did you learn today?
11. What new things did you learn today?

From these daily interviews, we hoped to discover what the students might have been thinking about while studying the novel---what they attended to or focused on. We wanted them to talk about what they liked or disliked about the novel, and what new things they might have learned. Finally, we wanted to get an idea of what they thought they might be doing in such a reading program.

After completing the novel, we conducted follow-up inter-
views as part of the data collection. We talked with the four focal students, hoping to get a feel for their reading experiences in my literature class. Those interview questions proceeded along the following guidelines:

1. What do you like or dislike about reading novels?
2. How is the way you are taught reading now different from the way other teachers in the past have taught you reading?
3. Which method do you like best, reading basals or reading novels? Why?
4. How has your attitude toward reading changed since you began reading novels?
5. What is the difference between a novel and a basal reader?
6. What kinds of reading skills did you learn from reading novels?
7. Would you read more books on the same subject?
8. What books do you read outside of school?
9. Do you read more now than you did before reading novels?

We hoped such follow-up interview questions might help us understand what students liked or dislike about reading instruction focusing on novels, which method, novels or basals, they liked best, how they thought the way I taught them reading seemed different
from the way teachers in the past had taught them reading, and if they knew the difference between a novel and a basal. Also, we wanted to see if they would read more on the subject under discussion in the novels, what books they might be reading outside the classroom, and if they read more now than they did before reading novels. Most importantly, we wanted to see if their attitude towards reading seemed to have changed since they began reading novels. Beginning in late April, the study lasted approximately five weeks.

Analyzing the Data

Analyzing the data proved to be a difficult, time consuming, and laborious task. Since I had no idea how to begin, I depended on the university researcher for help. We began by dividing each transcribed interview and lesson into events, or occurrences. We drew horizontal lines to segment the events giving each one a number. For example, a daily interview might look like this:

Interviewer: "Anything else?" (participant shook her head no) "OK. Uhm, you shook your head no. What were you thinking about during reading today?"

Participant: "I was wondering how the girl's gonna get food and try to communicate with them because she wasn't doing a good job. Uhm, let's see. Why she hated Daniel so much. It didn't explain it. Let's see. How she's gonna get to that place where the ships come in, and go to the place where her pen pal was living. Because what if Amy didn't want her to live with her? She wouldn't have any place to go. That's about all."

Interviewer: "What did you learn today in reading?"
Participant: "Uh, the problem that Julie had and, let's see." 1.5

We then categorized each event into domains, labeled with headings such as "What I Did in Reading Today" or "Reported Difficulties." A domain categorization sheet looked like the following:

**DOMAINS FOR DAILY INTERVIEWS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events</th>
<th>What I Did in Reading Today</th>
<th>Reported Difficulties</th>
<th>Thinking About</th>
<th>Learning About</th>
<th>What I Remember About Novel</th>
<th>Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We then made assertions about the focal students. For example, in one of the daily interviews a student declared himself thinking about the main character. We searched the data looking for examples to support or refute his claim. The student in this instance gave a number of responses focusing on the main character such as, "I was wondering how the girl's gonna get food and try to communicate with them because she wasn't doing a good job. Why she hated Daniel so much. It didn't explain it. How she's gonna get to that place where the ships come in, and go to the place where her pen pal was living. Because what if Amy didn't want her to live with her? She wouldn't have any place to go." Confidently we asserted that the student had been thinking about the main character while reading the story.
Results of the Project

The results of the project proved interesting, but perhaps not surprising. The first research question asked: How do children feel about reading instruction before engaging in a literature based reading program? Students recalled that they had done a variety of activities in past years. For example, all four focal students reported that they had been grouped, had used basals, had read short stories, and then had been responsible for answering the questions at the end, sometimes in class and sometimes at home. They did workbook pages and skill sheets which went along with their readers. On occasion a teacher might read a book or story aloud to them. They said at times they did arts and crafts activities, especially in primary grades.

The students seemed to have mixed feelings about past reading experiences. Jason recalled, "I didn't really like reading back then . . . because I thought it was real boring." He went on to say, "I just liked when Ms. Howell read us different stories and . . . a book out of the library."

Roy complained that "basal readers just deal with one subject [whereas novels deal with] just everything, death, and life and nature all mixed."

Another student, Beth, said she didn't like reading in the past "cause you had to sit with everybody else . . . and listen to them read . . . . I didn't like that because it was boring."
Jason thought basals to be pretty exciting until he started reading novels. He relates, "I guess you thought [reading] was pretty exciting because you didn't know what Mr. Kirk did and when you read just stories out of books you probably thought that was as exciting as it was gonna get."

Roy said that reading had been "funner in fifth grade because there's more . . . interesting novels than there is . . . basal readers."

Amy's tone indicated that she thought basals easier to read. She said, "They're [basals] easier like . . . I don't know, they use easier words. They don't get into this hard stuff."

The second research question addressed learning: What did the students learn in this literature based reading class? Much of what they learned appeared to be private and related to Frank Smith's (1985) idea of "deep structure" (p. 71). However, they also learned about author's writing style especially plot and mood; and, they learned about nature and the Eskimo culture too.

In *Reading Without Nonsense* Frank Smith (1985) suggests that "readers must bring meaning—*deep structure*—to what they read" (p. 71). Each student derived his or her own meaning, or deep structure, from reading *Julie of the Wolves*. When questioned about what they learned while reading the novel the students found it difficult to verbalize their thoughts on the subject. Their learning could more aptly be described as a positive change in attitude towards reading. Their positive change in attitude seemed to occur
because they could sympathize with the characters and their problems. In other words, they felt elated when the characters were elated; they felt sad when the characters were sad; and, they fretted and worried about them.

Galda (1989) claims that young readers "are captured by especially well-drawn characters" (p. 244). This appears to be true for over and over the focal students expressed an uneasiness as to "how the girl's gonna get food and try to communicate with [the wolves]" or how "the girl is going to get to San Francisco." They wondered if the "girl [was] gonna get with the leader of the wolf pack and get some food." The students knew that the main character's survival depended upon the wolf pack and so they wondered "what would happen if Amaroq [the wolf leader] got killed." Would "the other ones [wolves] . . . help her survive?"

The students learned about the author's writing style, especially plot and mood, and how good writing can quickly involve the reader. According to Galda, Carr, & Cox (1989) "plot is what many young readers read for; they want to be immediately immersed in what is happening" (p. 160). Each time the focal students were asked what they remembered about the novel, they always summarized the plot by making statements such as: "Julie had a problem that she couldn't find no food . . . she had to communicate with the wolves . . . . She had run away from her husband, Daniel." From such statements, it could be assumed that they were learning about plot development or "story structure (Tierney & Cunningham, 1989,
p. 637) which "prepares the reader to notice characters, problem
definition, settings, and resolution" (Anderson, 1989, p. 89).

The students indicated that they were moved by the mood of
the story and thus covertly learned how an author's writing style
could have an impact on one's emotions. Amy openly declared that
the mood of the book affected her. She said, "The mood was sort
of sad. I was real sad for Amaroq when he died . . . . I thought he
was gonna get up and go on."

Much overt learning about nature and the Eskimo culture
took place while studying the novel. The students realized how
cruel a natural environment could be, a major theme running
throughout the book. The main character had to survive while lost
on the harsh Alaskan tundra. Beth worried about "how she's gonna
survive through the winter. She had made her shelter out of sod
and mud from the river. She had to learn how to communicate with
the wolves."

The students reported that they were learning about the old
Eskimo culture. For instance, Roy said that he "learned the Eski-
mos liked . . . the inside of white owls, the . . . eternal organs
[viscera]" and that they had "arranged marriages" that you got out of
by simply "running away."

They were learning about the changing Eskimo culture too,
another theme running throughout the book: rusting oil drums
scattered about the landscape, Eskimo airplane pilots who take
American hunters on expeditions into the wilderness to wantonly
kill, the white man's modern conveniences found in the Eskimo vil-
lages, and the casting away of old Eskimo customs such as the
"i'noGo tied," (George, 1972, p. 85) a spiritual symbol.

In essence, as Anderson (1989) says, "learning occurs when
the learner acts upon incoming information, relating it to existing
knowledge and thus imposing organization and meaning" (p. 86).
These students seemed to be imposing their own organization and
meaning or "deep structure" (Smith, 1985, p. 71) on incoming infor-
mation on several different levels.

The last research question addressed emotion: How do chil-
dren feel about reading instruction after reading novels? Students
admitted that they had a change in attitude towards reading. They
liked the involvement; learning about the elements of fiction made
reading more interesting for them; and, strangely enough, even
though I did most of the reading, they felt they got to read more.

Beth said, "I like [reading] better in fifth grade . . . cause you
get to read and you know that if you don't get to read, you get to
follow along . . . You get to stand up and read . . . [and] we get to
read different novels.

Roy replied, "From k[indergarten] up to four, I never did read
. . . I didn't read the whole story. I just got the answers out of the
story and put 'em down and never did read 'em. [Now] I would like
to slip up there and get the book and read the rest of it, usually I
wouldn't want to do that. I'd just be glad [reading] was over."
Beth emphatically stated, "My attitude has changed." She continued, "I used to get real mad because I didn't get to read . . . I don't get mad . . . when it's more fun."

Jason exclaimed, "You can ask my mom. She said that . . . I didn't like reading at all until we started to read some . . . books like this."

Students liked the involvement that came with reading a novel because novels are more in-depth. For example, Beth said, "[The novel] gets right down into the problem of things."

Amy agreed, "A novel takes more time to read and they get into more depth."

Still, Roy recalled, "When you read a book it gives you the whole story."

Students seemed to think that learning about the elements of fiction made reading more interesting. Jason reported, "I like this year because . . . Mr. Kirk talk[ed] about the mood and the climax and the point of view . . . When you get to know all this stuff . . . you understand more about the book and what's going on in the book and so that's why I've . . . gotten more interested."

In short, the students in this study had mixed feelings about prior reading experiences; different private, personal levels of learning seemed to occur while the novel progressed; and, there appeared to be a positive change in the students' attitudes towards reading. But, the most exciting discovery showed that children really did get hooked on the characters and their problems. Their
involvement with the characters got them involved with the plot and they didn't want to stop reading. As Roy said, "you gotta stop [reading] and you got all these questions in your head and you can't ... get a book and read on 'cause [the teacher] keeps them up on the shelf and ain't no way to slip up there. Well, now I want to read 'em. 'Cause like I said ... I would like to slip up there and get the book and read the rest of it, usually I wouldn't want to do that. I'd just be glad [reading] was over with."

As I analyzed and thought about the data collected from the reading research project, I felt good and even more sure about my evolving teaching practices, especially in reading. The results of the project worked to verify many of my suspicions about students, teaching, and learning. Most students like a challenge. Smart, but perhaps too unsophisticated to verbalize it, they know when teachers are patronizing them by watering down the curriculum under the guise that they must teach to meet the needs of all children. Conversely, I taught my class as a whole treating everyone as an equal, academically expecting, without saying so, that all could achieve, regardless of the labels they had acquired over the years. They rose to meet those expectations.

Also, over the years, through instinct, support, and exploration, I believe I developed a certain sureness about the way I taught, not only reading but indeed all subjects. I felt myself growing into a solid teacher, although perhaps not an exciting or popular one. Anyway, I never viewed teaching as a popularity contest. I do believe I supported my students while at the same time offering a challenge. Thus, I respected them in a most profound but concealed way.
To summarize, virtually beginning without a recognizable teaching philosophy, mine evolved over time just like everything else in life. My credo began to grow as my guileless inexperience changed to wisdom based on various teaching encounters in the classroom. As an outcome, my pedagogical practices began to change too. Schematically dependent, my theory of teaching built from an underdeveloped and perhaps unrecognizable idea, a malleable and pliable one, at first resting on the wishes and desires of my superiors, and then grew from my own developing needs. Furthermore, my personal culture, my socio-economic class, my own successes and failures in school, as well as my own life stories, played a major role in the development of my teaching doctrine. Indeed, my precepts fluctuated with educational trends but remained anchored to a common core—growing background knowledge. Becoming more and more astute as a teacher, I believe I eventually allowed my evolving teaching practices to take shape around what I thought my students needed as well as my own teaching appetite.

Today, my philosophy of education continues to be one of organization while leaving the door ajar for flexibility and change based on my own desires and distending experiences, as well as the acceptance of technology, especially computers, as a modern form of expanding communication in the field of education. Otherwise, I have nothing new to offer—no ground breaking news, no shattering revelations, no ground swells of educational information, no suggestions for a Garden of Eden in which all children can learn. What I can offer is a perpetual curiosity about learning and educational trends as well as years of teaching and administrative experiences, both good and bad, earned through trial and error, and exploration, which have shaped and molded me into a headstrong, while at the same time, cautious and caring teacher.
Chapter 15
Advanced Studies

After the visiting university faculty member and I completed our work together on the reading research project, she suggested that I return to graduate school and pursue advanced studies. But content, I never anticipated leaving my teaching position at Riner Elementary School. Occasionally, taking graduate classes for certificate renewal, I fleetingly thought about chasing after more graduate work. But, the risk seemed much too great. With a teaching position providing steady income, children to raise, house and car payments to make, and numerous other family responsibilities, what would be advantageous about threatening such security?

But, my lot seems to have been inexplicably cast. Strangely reaching another turning point moment, I returned to school. Enigmatically, a chain of events began linking themselves together like lumbering elephants, tails and trunks intertwined. First, I went home and casually mentioned the proposition to Katy. Surprisingly, she balked at the notion very little, especially since working part time as a graduate assistant would bring in some money. Second, the new principal at the school encouraged me to take a leave of absence, assuring me that my teaching position would still await me upon return. I must admit, her promise helped make my decision for leaving much easier, feeling that when I completed my leave of absence I would simply return to Riner Elementary School and continue teaching as always. Third, and even more bizarre, the date for requesting an educational leave of absence from the Montgomery County Public School system had already passed. This meant that the school board must approve my re-
quest. And then, the university faculty member wrote the letter requesting a leave of absence on my behalf. She gave the letter to me. I simply signed it and sent it to the school board; it came back approved. Finally, the university accepted my request and provided me part time work as a graduate assistant.

Leaving Riner Elementary School proved difficult. Within its walls I had learned about teaching, discovering it to be a complex, demanding, but rewarding profession. There, I had started to not only believe in myself as a teacher but to believe in myself as a person who had something to offer to the field of education. I had started to appreciate, after working with so many children for so long, that nobody is "dumb." Everyone simply has a different learning style due to personal circumstances and it is the teacher's responsibility to challenge, to instruct, and to meet the individual needs of every student.

Similarly, after years of struggle in the classroom my colleagues and the community had finally begun to respect my work. They sought my advice and agreed with many of my suggestions. Each year several parents requested that their children be placed in my classroom because I had developed a reputation as being challenging, firm, fun, and fair. As a teacher, I had begun to experiment and dabble in research.

Nevertheless, leaving eleven years of security behind, I began doctoral level classes at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University while supervising student teachers in the Roanoke Valley Student Teacher Model. That year manifested itself as one of the most difficult, but rewarding, years of my life. Overcome with dozens of difficult books to read, deep discussions, papers to write, and projects to complete, I felt intimidated and afraid of failure once again.
Apprehensive, I carried a dictionary around with me trying to figure out the esoteric language with which many people spoke, and in which many books and papers were written. Running across such high sounding words as positivism, postpositivism, technocratic ideology, critical social science, praxis, cognitive-mediational paradigm, paradigmatic diversity, and constructivist theory, I wondered: What are these people talking and writing about? I could never be successful here. I can't even understand their language. But, when the year finally ended in success, I found that I had gained more confidence in myself as a learner. At the university I had met many people and had made many friends who believed and trusted in me. We laughed together; we cried together; we struggled together; and, we supported each other. A certain kind of comradeship developed which can never be duplicated because of the people involved. It turned out to be a very successful and meaningful year.

Shouldering a very demanding, challenging, and many times seemingly overwhelming work load at the university may have been a test of my academic skills, but during this period my mother became very ill. She suddenly abandoned the farm where I grew up, telling us, the children, "If you young'uns want anything out of that old house go get it. I won't be goin' home no more." This act of courage on her part tugged at my deep seated emotions. After many years of trying to kill my roots, I found them dying completely. I realized how foolish I had been and wanted to fertilize them, revive them, and bring them back to life. I held a need to return to my past, to hold on to part of the familiar, to cling to those fading memories of long ago when Mom had once called us home from play. I wanted to smell the pungent wood smoke from her early morning breakfast fire, to hear the sizzling fatback frying, dripping grease for bubbling, steamy gravy in Mom's
hot, heavy, and black cast iron skillet. I craved the sweet taste of her buttered jelly biscuits once more. I saw clearly for the first time that those memories could only be that---memories---and I feared their being lost like bubbles in a babbling mountain brook.

That year, between classes, I traveled back and forth from Marion, visiting Mom in a nursing home only to witness her steady decline both physically and emotionally. She became despondent and sad, believing she had entered the nursing home to die. She murmured incoherently about past events, getting them all jumbled up into an indistinguishable mess. After some time, my older sister removed her from the nursing home, not wanting her to wither away amid strangers. She stayed in my sister's home for a while and miraculously began to mend. But, due to restrictions leveled by the Social Security Administration, Medicare, and Medicaid, my sister had to find her an apartment in a senior citizen retirement facility in Marion. She continued to improve. Now, children residing in the area take turns living with her on weekends. A visiting nurse looks after her during the week. I call her most weekends and visit her often. Mom just turned ninety-three.

Before returning to the classroom in the fall, I enrolled in The Southwest Virginia Writing Project. Held at Radford University during the summer, it offered a final challenge to my year as a graduate student---writing. To be sure, I read several books that summer, but mostly, I wrote. I kept a daily journal; I wrote a research outline; I kept a journal in which I analyzed my writing style. For example, writing a creative selection on the right side of a page, I explored my thought processes and composition practices by reflecting on them and then writing about them on the left side of the article. For the project, I also wrote many creative
pieces about growing up in Appalachia, both prose and poetry, some of which appear in this document.

During the writing project, I started to think seriously and deeply about my Appalachian past. I entertained a long forgotten need for trying to reclaim some of the lost memories. Such thought processes began in an enlightening way, perhaps starting with my mother's recent departure from the old home place but continuing as a result of the course's requirements. As part of the program, the professor split the class into groups to discuss the readings as well as each other's written compositions. The fellows making up my creative writing discussion group happened to be all Appalachians from Southwest Virginia. They wrote poems and stories related to families and home life while growing up in the mountains. As a consequence, listening to their stories, reading them, and reflecting upon their origin, further sparked the reclamation of my own vanishing heritage. I followed their lead and began writing pieces centering around those same cultural themes. For me, reading and critiquing their work helped to generate and encourage a new feeling about my past---something to be proud of, not ashamed. I learned also that it's far easier to write about something you know and have an interest in, especially an emotional interest. Thus, during the course of the writing project, I composed the following poem (see Figure 19, p. 303a) as well as the narrative found in the introduction to this document entitled, "Misplaced Daydreams: Faraway Places Lead Back Home."

Jimmy Came From Baltimore

Every summer,
Jimmy came from Baltimore,
on the train.
He came:

to fields of dark green corn,
shushed and quietly whispering
one to another;

to meadows of fresh mown hay, baled,
where a few days before
a sea of tall grass had swelled, waved
and fled before the wind;

to fields of wheat, bobbing,
nodding quietly under the
watchful eye of the hot
summer sun;

to mountain hollows,
grapevine swings,
cabins in the woods,
and hikes to the top of Bear Ridge;

to search, for the old graveyard
in the dark shadows
of the Plumber Woods
where tall pines moan and groan,
thickets of rhododendron bushes grow,
and the moss is soft and springy
beneath the feet;

to rivers, fast flowing,
and mountain streams,
cold and gushing;

to swim, in murky, blue-green waters
while brown, beady-eyed snakes
sunned themselves on
the bank, coil themselves round
bushes that draped the shore,
and then plopped, with a splash,
when teased into the lazy river;

to cut a fishing pole, and
"never catch nothing,
but crawdads;"
to orange full moons,
    hanging bright
    over Iron Mountain;

to chase the sheep,
    among the bambi plants
    on Rich Hill;

to whippoorwills, issuing forth their
    plaintive calls, the twinkle of fireflies
    at dusk, and owls screeching and hooting
    in the night.

He came,
    because years before my dad had said to my sister,
    "That boy'll stay with us ever summer."

Every fall,
    Jimmy went back to Baltimore,
    on the train.

Return to the Classroom

    That autumn, I returned to the classroom after my year's stay at the university. But, reentering so soon afterwards proved to be a mistake. For I had sampled successfully the challenging world of academia. Like spanning a deep and dangerous chasm, the need to return to doctoral work kept tugging at me, as yet unsatisfied, need to prove myself as an Appalachian, to prove that I wasn't "dumb," that I could make it in the academic world. However, my craving for such an academic challenge would remain with me for several years. My return to the classroom marked a period of troubled and unhappy turmoil for me. My discontent simmered over the next four years as I floundered about searching for a peaceful, satisfying solution, or perhaps a supernatural revelation, to soothe my building disconsolation. As an answer, I decided that other school related tasks might fill the void and so I began applying for administrative offices. Eventually, I
would claim such an award but over the next year, I sat, to no avail, through approximately eight interviews for administrative positions.

Conversely, and extremely unhappy, when the school session began in the fall, I found myself as one of seven fifth grade teachers at a large elementary school, a surprising discovery after having been one of two fifth grade teachers for eleven years. For, even though the principal at my former school had guaranteed me a teaching position at the school upon my return, the school board does not sanction such agreements. It only agrees to holding a position for a returnee at the same level at which they left.

Thus, my first teaching assignment after a year's sabbatical proved tough for a variety of reasons. First, disgruntled with teaching, I still craved the challenge of graduate school where I had worked so hard and continued to gain confidence in myself as a learner. But, also, while away at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, the county school system shifted paradigms in dealing with special education students. It moved from a self containment program with mainstreaming when practical to a program of full inclusion. This meant placement for special education students, no matter how severe their learning disability, in regular classrooms. As a result, the principal assigned a student labeled severely emotionally disturbed to my care. I wrote about the child once as a way of capturing the experience on paper and so that others might try to understand my concerns and frustrations:

Joseph

Joseph entered my fifth grade classroom in September, two weeks after school started. Institutionalized, he had spent no more
than two hours per day in any classroom for a while. Certainly, his absence from a public school setting for over two years alarmed me. "Not to worry," the principal said, "a full time aide has been hired to help care for his needs."

Joseph's former acquaintances, spoke about his troubling characteristics. He bit, scratched, kicked and screamed. He yelled profanities repeatedly. He threatened suicide, refused to do any kind of work, ran away, hallucinated, thought he heard voices, and switched personalities, suddenly changing from a calm, almost shy, quiet, little boy to an incorrigible bully. He manipulated, took advantage, feigned sickness, and demanded to see his mother.

Before his arrival, former teachers, his new principal, his mother, special education supervisors, his newly hired aide, and I met to discuss Joseph and to work out plans for helping him. Numerous other people visited my classroom as well. A psychologist and a special education teacher observed for three days. We met at the end of each day to discuss strategies. Two other special education teachers, already at the school, joined the team as support personnel for ensuring Joseph's success.

The week before Joseph came, my fifth graders received counseling as to what kind of classmate they might be dealing with over the year. A special education teacher discussed the needs of special children. The students participated in an activity called "Circle of Friends" through which they learned that if Joseph were to succeed in a public school setting their kindness, generosity, and
understanding seemed paramount. Receptive and open, the students' generosity and caring attitude moved me. For, unanimously, they agreed to help, volunteering to be his friends and protectors. His mother came to the first open house and spoke about her son's special needs to the other parents.

Finally, Joseph arrived. At times, while dealing with his constant interruptions, I became totally frustrated. Puzzled, I had many unanswerable questions. Why couldn't he sit down and do the work like the other children? He seemed extremely bright, being on or above grade level in most subjects. How did he ever learn to function at such a level academically if at some point he had not sat down and done some work? But, truthfully, Joseph had learned despite his handicaps and despite the fact that adults wanted him to be, and act, "normal," and to do the work.

To be sure, confusion seemed to surround him. His frequent storming in and out of the classroom, his normal voice level, which seemed to be a bit higher than the other children's, and the constant hum and buzz necessary for his aide to assist him, only added to the hubbub existing naturally in any classroom. Such frequent interruptions required adjustment.

Working with Joseph had its emotional moments however. One morning during journal writing time he came to my desk and said, "Mr. Kirk, would you read this? I want to share it with the class." Taken totally by surprise, this being only the second time
since he entered my classroom that he had not rebelled against
journal writing, I read over the scribbled entry.

He had written about his pet hamster, Jeanette, who had
been a visitor to the classroom but who had died the previous week
while Joseph had been out sick. In the entry, he talked about how
much he loved Jeanette and how he missed her. I said, "Joseph,
are you sure you want to read this aloud to the class? It's very per-
sonal."

"Yes, I want to read it," he assured me.

I called the class's attention and Joseph began to read. Half
way through the reading he burst into tears and looking at me said,
"I can't read it." I put my arms around him and we finished reading it
together before a silent audience of stunned children unaccustomed
to seeing such honest, open emotion displayed by one of their
peers.

Often, I became angry with Joseph. I wanted him to do well
in my classroom; I wanted him to succeed. I wanted him to sit
down and do the work just like everyone else. But, Joseph, refus-
ing, defied the normal characteristics associated with everyone
else. Besides, he did do the work; he simply did it his way.

His resistant behaviors always confused me. Trying to sec-
ond guess them and head them off became a mystery and an exer-
cise in futility. I found myself constantly asking: "What happened?"
Why did that make him act, or react, in such a way? What should I
have done differently?"
For example, one rainy day with a game of speed ball going on in the room, Joseph lost control. Tossing a rag ball about the room until all but one player remains standing, there can only be one winner. Joseph got through the first game very well. He sat down when he dropped the ball after it had been tossed to him. However, in the second game, he suddenly threw the ball under the radiator, stormed out of the room into the rain, and slammed the door behind him. He ran to the principal's office and hid under a couch. When the principal asked him to leave, he did so but continued to stalk up and down the main hallway of the school bellowing obscenities to anyone whom he chanced to meet. A half hour later he returned to the classroom laughing and smiling as though nothing had happened.

Simple things seemed to have the greatest impact on Joseph's emotional stability. He might collapse into a sobbing heap because he had forgotten to put mustard and ketchup on his hot dog. Once, I heard him pounding on the outside door to the classroom in a rage. He had run from the cafeteria because he thought the cafeteria lady told him he must buy a full tray to get one orange juice. Another time, in January, Joseph returned early from his physical education class. He slumped down before me and said, "I'm just a dumb, fat, "fuck." Surprised, I wanted to know why he felt this way. Because, his physical education teacher had informed them that day that they would be taking the physical fitness tests in the spring. Joseph felt that he would never be able to pass them.
To be sure, working with Joseph did have its moments of encouragement. The fact that he could write about a dead hamster and then read about it before his classmates with such emotion encouraged me. He sat in tears his first day in my classroom and said, "What do you want me to write about in my journal, how stupid and dumb I am?"

Not being able to spend more than two hours a day in an academic setting for two years, he now spent most of the day in school. He did math problems on the computer, completed social studies projects, participated in art classes, loved to read aloud when called upon, and liked science. Overall, Joseph had made a little progress, a very encouraging sign.

I attribute most of Joseph's successes to his support personnel, especially his aide. She got to know him much better than I did. Striving to keep disruptions to a minimum, she redirected and diffused his negative behaviors in a gentle fashion. Likewise, I must compliment his classmates. They became his support group and in turn they themselves learned a great lesson in caring and the diversity of human nature.

Although I agreed with the full inclusion program, I felt inadequate in meeting the academic needs of all my students while having to deal with a severely emotionally disturbed child such as Joseph. Perhaps, had he been assigned to my care before I ever left the classroom, my dealings with him may have been less dramatic and more fulfilling. But, frustrated and dissatisfied and
still missing graduate classes at the university, and yet wanting to try administrative work, I vowed to leave the classroom altogether.

When school ended that year I packed up all my belongings and did not anticipate returning. I hoped to reenter the university and finish my degree since work in administration had not proved fruitful. But, mysteriously my destiny seemed to have shifted again. I would be an administrator after all. That summer, I accepted a job as an assistant principal, working in the same school where I had taught the previous year. I welcomed the change in employment for a variety of reasons: I felt it would keep me busy at something new and help me get the desire to return to academia out of my system; I had decided that I wanted to try administration; and, besides, full time employment seemed to be much more lucrative, money wise, and more prestigious than part time labor as a graduate assistant at the university.
Chapter 16

Engaging in a Difficult Task—Administration

Indeed, administrative work as an assistant principal manifested itself as an engaging and difficult task. And, upon reflection, because the job proved to be so demanding, perhaps I helped to run the school like a bureaucracy. For, in essence, I began my responsibilities much as I had begun my teaching twelve years earlier, as an adversary, following a rigid schedule and taking a reactive stance as opposed to a proactive one. In my simplicity, I merely withdrew from an old dusty file cabinet hidden deep within my mind a pre-written lesson plan much like the one I had used as a beginning teacher. I followed what I thought my principal's administrative philosophy demanded as I covered my many and varied tasks.

And, the sad part is, my transition from a cautious and caring teacher to a robotic administrator happened without difficulty, like water slipping through a sieve. As a teacher, I had moved away from such a dehumanizing state of mind. But then, as an administrator, and without intent, I joined the oppressors because I had not mellowed enough in my thinking about oppression, the oppressed, and my role as a possible inconspicuous oppressor to rise above the power granted to me through my authoritative position as an assistant principal. Therefore, inadvertently I returned to such an oppressive pedagogy because of its historically omnipresent, embracing, and dangerous, but self-serving and gratifying dominance over me. Shamefully, as an assistant principal I epitomized such power for I saw myself as a "behavior" or a "response" which would facilitate control of the learning environment (Wirth, 1983). Thus, I carried out my extensive list of
chores perfunctorily, without feeling, without heart, in my work as a naive and obedient administrator.

For example, I constantly talked to the children concerning bus conduct since bus drivers turned in bus conduct reports almost daily. Much as an errant employee might be cautioned after three infractions, the students got a warning and then if the misconduct continued they had to find their own transportation to and from school, progressively working from three days, to a week, to permanent suspension from the bus as directed by the principal’s rules.

I helped teachers with bus room duty each morning by circulating and attempting to keep order and control while shuttling methodically back and forth between the cafeteria and the bus ramp like an efficient manager. Resembling a parade of long yellow bananas, twelve buses unloaded at the elementary school while another twelve did the same at the primary school located down the hill; then, they reversed positions. By the time the last bus arrived and unloaded, almost all six hundred students had gone trooping, one after the other, into the cafeteria---the bus room---to await first bell. They sat all crammed together like stuffed peppers in a simmering pot, their bulging coats, gangly or pudgy bodies, and cumbersome backpacks overflowing around them into each other's personal space. Crowded and noisy, with breakfast taking place at the same time, the bus room spawned many squabbles, scuffles, and fights.

Then, in the afternoon, I helped supervise the children on the loading platform as they filed out of the building in straight rows from their classrooms stretching along the long hallways. On their way to their assigned buses they walked with stooped shoulders, plodding feet, bobbing heads, and heavy satchels slung over their shoulders, reminding me of tired miners heading home after toil-
ing underground all day. I expected them to burst into a high pitched song at any moment: "Hi! Ho! Hi! Ho! It's home from work we go."

I carried out my duties in working with special needs children in a business like fashion and in conjunction with the rules and regulations of the special education and gifted offices. After the completion of all paperwork, special education referrals included organizing for child studies, observations, eligibilities, IEPs (Individualized Education Plans), and reevaluations. Special education meetings took place two times a week and could last two hours or more as we haggled over such items as test scores, observations, teacher recommendations, and mystified and often angry parent comments. The central office and I collaborated on testing referrals for the gifted and talented program too, informing parents and accomplishing testing procedures as though we were preparing the students for factory work.

Near noon, I became a pharmacist's helper, assisting the secretary and principal in the dispensation of drugs. We methodically handed out a variety of medicines from Ritalin to aspirin, recording the dosage, date, time, and child's name in a large binder. We stored all medicines alphabetically, locking them in a metal file cabinet. Throughout the day the office area became an infirmary and so, donning rubber gloves, I mechanically performed nursing duties by checking fevers, diagnosing rashes, applying ice, allowing sick children to lie down for a while, and calling parents to pick up ailing patients. I examined students for head lice and conducted scabies checks, small parasites living and crawling under the skin. I took on the role of a social worker scrutinizing and questioning children about suspicious bruises and burns, possible abuse and neglect, and reporting such incidences to child protective services and the guidance counselor.
My cursory tasks continued as I accomplished another timely chore in a "technocratic" (Wirth, 1983, p. 107) fashion—standardized tests. The ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) for all grade levels and the Literacy Passport test for fourth graders, took place in the spring. The CogAT, (Cognitive Abilities Test) another battery of standardized tests, were programmed in the fall for third and fifth graders. As the coordinator, I organized, planned, and scheduled all such testing for the school. My responsibilities, for each classroom, included sorting numbered test booklets and answer sheets, providing monitors, planning activities and supervision for exempted students, accomplishing make up tests, and then collecting and sorting the testing materials for remailing.

Furthermore, I helped with management control in the cafeteria during lunch period which lasted nearly two hours on a smooth day. With almost six hundred students moving in and out in shifts, conveyor-belt fashion, the cafeteria became noisy and loud and the two lunch room aides had difficulty controlling the masses. The whole affair became zoo-like, especially when, on rainy and cold days, physical education activities proceeded behind a curtain drawn half way across the whole area. Some parents complained about the noise level but then, when the principal and I placed noise level restrictions on the offending students, other parents said the place had become like a concentration camp. Working out a satisfactory solution seemed to take a back seat in light of everything else happening around the factory—school. Therefore, I simply became a floor walker and carried out my duties by pacing up and down the aisles, talking to the children and placing excessively loud students on quiet lunch at an isolated table. In other words, I culled out the bad "products" as a good quality control engineer might do.
Another chore with the potential for turning into a calamity, and which I carried out like a good office manager because of such a danger, required hiring daily substitute teachers and keeping track of them for a particular teacher on a particular day. Knowing ahead of time helped, but often teachers got sick during the day, requested half days, or called in sick, many times waking me at home early in the morning. Then, the ritual began. Going down a long list of available substitutes sent out by the central office, I made phone call after phone call. In most cases, I eventually got an agreement from someone to teach for the day, but all the while, with a panicked feeling gripping my thoughts, I feared all substitutes had been taken, especially the dependable ones. If, on a rare occasion, a substitute could not be found, I either took the class myself or farmed the students out to other teachers. Hiring substitute teachers became even more challenging near the end of the school year, or around holidays, when teachers requested more time off for earned personal leave days.

Running the school like a well oiled machine seemed to demand that I supervise safety patrols, attend PTA meetings, help with school carnivals, assist with fund raisers and assemblies, and act as an extra chaperone for field trips, in addition to all other activities taking place on a daily basis. Furthermore, I instructed occasionally, modeling content area reading activities for science and social studies classes. Once, I taught a literature unit to a group of fifth graders using the novel, Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor, modeling for a teacher placed on a plan of improvement. As part of my work plan, I developed a series of workshops for staff development in which the faculty and I discussed the pros and cons of whole language. We attempted to identify such a teaching philosophy's major components. Too, I gave teachers ideas on how to incorporate
content area reading activities into their daily lesson plans. On the whole, I felt no joy in such flimsy teaching. It manifested itself as an unappreciated chore, a way of instructing another teacher how to teach to a class for which I had not bonded. It became an extra burden for the teachers who seemed uninterested because such superficial instruction became my agenda, not theirs.

The principal and I shared some corporate responsibilities such as discipline, complaints, and teacher observations and evaluations. Misbehavior associated with discipline, or lack thereof, surprised me. I had dealt with a few such problems during my years as a teacher but nothing like I encountered as an assistant principal. Every day we found children parked outside our offices like defective merchandise, having been sent there by thwarted teachers or other workers in the school for being disrespectful, refusing to work, or fighting. As a teacher, I handled such infractions myself, only rarely escorting a child to the principal’s office. But, I quickly learned that teachers have different ways of dealing with such problems. Some handle discipline as part of their normal classroom routines, others view it as the principal's responsibility. Perhaps as a holdover from former administrators, I found that most teachers at the school held the latter belief.

For whatever reason, the teachers demanded that the principal and I use our administrative powers to get rid of the troublemakers so that the "good students" could learn (The Good Common School, 1993). In other words, their real wants involved getting administration to stop the consistently disruptive students without involving them, the teachers. Such vicarious discipline techniques proved virtually impossible to fulfill since all of our motivation comes from within and acts as an attempt at controlling ourselves to satisfy our own needs. Besides, control-
ling ourselves to satisfy our needs is almost always related to our constant attempts at controlling what goes on around us (Glasser, 1986). For students, the desire for control is no less coveted and becomes a problem when such desires clash with a teacher's need for superintendence in governing his or her surroundings and meeting his or her own needs. Furthermore, "when adults use disciplinary approaches variously described as 'highly controlling,' 'power-assertive,' or just plain punitive, children become more disruptive, aggressive, and hostile" (Kohn, 1993, pp. 167, 168). Especially since "today's children are simply imitating the violence they see in the adult world" (Boyer, 1995, p. 25).

Thus, rather than determining the underlying causes of the students' misbehavior through the reflection and examination of their own classroom manners, which play a silent role in generating disciplinary problems, the teachers chose to place full responsibility for all misconduct squarely on the students' shoulders. In doing so, frustrated and clueless, they asked for assistance in eliminating behavioral symptoms, not the causes, which only exacerbated the problem, worsening the behavior on the part of the unruly children (The Good Common School, 1993). And, as long as the teachers saw themselves as controlling managers seeking assistance from someone whom they thought to be more powerful in dealing with such possibly self-induced discipline problems, they would never accept the idea that a solution might lie within their own grasp: restructuring their teaching so that it became more satisfying (Glasser, 1986) to students, thus helping to decrease disruptions and increase productive work (Wirth, 1983).

Indeed, I knew how to use my disciplinary powers in a punitive way. It had been part of my past, my culture, my classroom management strategies. It had also been something which I had tried to flee physically and psychologically, as
well as culturally. Because of my struggles in overcoming such an oppressive technique, as an Appalachian and as a classroom teacher, I found myself caught between two worlds again, pitted against my role as a perceived disciplinarian by the faculty and my desire to avoid such a domineering pedagogy. Dealing with discipline as an adversary posed a troubling and ostensibly unsolvable challenge for me. For, it seemed that in trying to satisfy the desires of the teachers' wants towards a firm stand on discipline, the results for all of us, the teachers, the principal, and I, involved expending an unnecessary amount of time and energy in dealing with disruptive students. Likewise, the disrespectful pupils spent just as much time and energy, or more, in opposing our efforts at control for such punitive measures often incite "resistance and resentment, which a child may take out on other people, such as peers," (Kohn, 1993, p. 167), teachers, and administrators.

In trying to manage what went on around us, and as empowered bureaucrats might do, the principal and I visited classrooms every day, wandering in and out, stopping to chat occasionally with a teacher or student. We observed employees, the teachers, and wrote up their evaluations which basically fell into two categories: full and partial. Full evaluations occurred each year for three years after initial employment. After the third year, supposing the teacher had earned a continuing contract, full evaluations took place every other year thereafter.

School board guidelines expected teachers on full evaluations to develop two or three goals for themselves to accomplish throughout the year, such as humanizing instruction, providing for individual differences, or better use of materials and resources. School board policy also stipulated that teachers on full evaluations be observed while teaching at least two times, once formally and
once informally. Formally meant they invited us in to witness a lesson; informally meant we dropped in at our convenience. Evaluations included such indicators as planning, school/classroom management, instruction, and professional qualities.

The school board expected partial evaluatees to develop two or three goals to work on throughout the year too but observations on partial evaluatees were not required. The principal and I did observe them teach however and wrote up a summary of the observation at least once sometime during the year.

Perhaps the school environment functioning as it did within a factory atmosphere, impersonal and cold, caused parents to rarely back administrative decisions since a significant degenerating theme seemed to exist: "the lack of trusting, respectful communication and relationship building between the home and school" (Bartoli, 1995, p. 91). At any rate, such lack of support seemed evident. So, hypocritically, we attentively listened, without caring, to patrons complain about a variety of concerns: discipline measures, a certain teacher, the cafeteria food, a bus driver, a dangerous bus route, a decision that the school board had made, and a plethora of other matters, many of which we had absolutely no control over.

Caught up within this bureaucratic mentality, life at the school seemed to swirl on around me. For certain, I didn't recognize such a phenomena. However, in light of so many students and teachers as well as the number of tasks and responsibilities expected of me as an assistant principal, I suppose such "technocracy" (Wirth, 1983, p. 107) automatically and reflexively stepped forward as the best way to manage the whole affair. As a result, I may have appeased my superiors but I unwittingly dehumanized my charges---innocent children---reducing
them, their accomplishments, their parents, and teachers to technocratic "thingification" (Wirth, 1983). Had I been able to evolve and change as a principal, as I had done as a teacher, perhaps my management techniques would have evolved and changed with me. But, as my list of "technocratic" (Wirth, 1983, p. 107) accomplishments rolled on, my days as a "plant manager," disguised under the pseudonym assistant principal, turned into numbers.

Due to the overcrowded conditions existing at the school, the school board and the county officials approved funds for the building of a new school, forcing the redrawing of attendance boundaries. Thus, in alleviating the situation by dropping the population of the school to around three hundred, they also eliminated the need for an assistant principal. Therefore, at the end of my first year as an administrator, I found myself in another fix. But, I had several options. I could return to the classroom, which I did not feel ready for at the time; I could return to graduate school and complete my degree, which still simmered in the back of my mind like a boiling pot ready to overflow; or, I could continue applying for principal positions, which I really wanted to try, if for no other reason than to continue to explore administration as a possible path towards contentment.

I took the middle choice. I reapplied to the university. They accepted me as a graduate student once again, offering me a part time job as a graduate assistant too. Excited, I looked forward to returning to college. But, in the meantime, still mildly interested in administrative work, I interviewed for another principal position. I thought such an opportunity would never come about since I had interviewed several times before for a likely position and had been passed over each time. Furthermore, I thought that one year as an assistant principal did not give me enough experience to qualify for a full administrative position. But, sur-
prisingly, the school board hired me and expected me to begin work two weeks before school started. Graduate school, the elusive draw, and still very much on my mind, would wait for two more years.

Principal

Thus, I became a principal. As such, I handled all of the same responsibilities I did as an assistant but perhaps with less bureaucratic control. Why? Because, somehow I had felt as an assistant principal and, even now, though unskilled as a principal, that to permanently move beyond an oppressive pedagogy "traditional notions of control must give way to building a community where individual responsibility and trust are the guiding principles" (Bartoli, 1995, p. 94) not "technocratic ideology" (Wirth, 1983, p. 1). I subconsciously believed that wise administrators use their leadership abilities to snatch up and use the qualifications of their faculty members, an expertise shaped by history, story, and action. Overlooking such knowledge evolving through experience is sheer folly for much talent is wasted. Including such knack is prudent for it allows individuals some leeway into governing what goes on around them, showcasing their importance, and letting them know that they are not being oppressed by some over zealous control "freak."

Of course, all responsibilities under the traditional view of administration rested on my shoulders alone, including the budget. However, as a school, a few differences did exist. Its enrollment, for example, totaled approximately two hundred, fluctuating back and forth with the employment situation in the area. Fifteen faculty members filled positions in grades kindergarten through fifth, with one kindergarten, two firsts, two seconds, one third, two fourths, and one fifth. Relieved, I discovered that I would be dealing with only four school buses.
Furthermore, the school, built in the 1950s, and once located in a rural area, had witnessed many changes over the years. Its rural surroundings had virtually been destroyed, bisected by a major interstate. It sat within sight of the high speed roadway, near a busy intersection of off and on ramps, convenience stores, an antique mall, and a car auction house. Once a country road had meandered past the school. But, due to the construction boom taking place in the area, it had changed to a busy thoroughfare, destined to become a four-laned highway soon.

Over the years the school experienced a slew of principals. The first one stayed twenty-two years. But, alarmingly, after his retirement, there then came a series of sporadic stays by other administrators, including myself---four years, one, three, two, two, two, two. We all left for various reasons I suppose, bigger schools, more prestige, relocations within other states, towns, or counties, and, as for myself, graduate school.

As well, the facility had grown outdated in terms of space. Over the years it had become overcrowded with the addition of such programs as Reading Recovery, art, music, physical education, Chapter One, the Writing-to-Read computer lab, special education, guidance, and computer stations. As a result, two mobile units, parked in back of the school, served as additional instructional areas for music and art. A smaller unit used for special education offices and small classrooms sat in front of the main building, positioned to the right.

Even with its fluctuating enrollment, advancing age, troubling administrative turnovers, and outdated and overcrowded facilities, the school offered an exciting challenge. I entered with high expectations of making it a model school, the best in the county. As its principal, I just knew that I would bring all the people
together to build a community of learners; that I would bring the curriculum together to achieve coherence; and, that I would bring many resources together to enrich the school's climate (Boyer, 1995). Under my leadership the parents, students, and teachers would all work together for a common cause—the welfare and benefit of all the children. Delighted at the possibilities, I immediately wrote the following letter to my staff:

PRINCIPAL'S MESSAGE

AUGUST 31, 1992

Welcome back! I am looking forward to working with you this year. As a new administrator, I have much to learn and many challenges to meet.

My personal philosophy, and one which you will hear me say often, is, "We are all in this together." I do not have all the answers, but I do believe that educating children, our top priority, is a team effort. The whole language curriculum emphasizes the fact that children learn through collaboration and working cooperatively together; adults are no different. People, as learners, do not reach their full potential if they insist on working in a vacuum. Growth occurs when people are open to change, set high expectations for themselves and those around them, and work as a team with common goals in mind.

This year we must:

- continue to move towards a literature-based whole language curriculum.
- emphasize reading, especially literature.
- focus on writing, especially process writing.
- concentrate on math and science.
- set high expectations for ourselves and our students.
  (If we believe our children can achieve, they can.)
- carry a positive attitude at all times.
- create a non-threatening, learning environment for teachers, parents, and most importantly, the children.
  (They are our reason for being here.)
Two areas which are not satisfactory countywide are spelling and physical education. We must:

- place a greater emphasis on physical education.
- make spelling one of our top priorities.

To be sure, the aforementioned goals are not complete. However, they are something to strive for and a beginning.

Remember, Plum Creek Elementary School [a pseudonym] is not just "my" school; it is not just "your" school; it is not just the "parents'" school. Plum Creek Elementary is "our" school, and most important, it is the "childrens'" school. They are the reason we must all work together as a team to help it continue to be the best school in Montgomery County.

Best wishes for an exciting and successful year.

Luther Kirk
Principal

And then, after a month, I wrote a second supportive letter to my faculty:

October 6, 1992

Memo from: Luther Kirk
To: The Faculty and Staff of Plum Creek Elementary School
Re: Thanks for a job well done.

This memo is a note of thanks. The first month of school has come and gone and things seem to have progressed rather smoothly. Teachers, you are doing a wonderful job! I see many innovative and creative things taking place in each classroom. I am impressed with your dedication and expertise. I appreciate all of the hard work you do and the many extra hours you spend in preparation, attending workshops and PTA meetings, conferring with parents, and counseling with students. I want you to continue to be experimenters by trying new and innovative ways of teaching. Autonomy can work miracles if channeled in the right direction.

Continue to have high expectations for your students and for yourselves. Laugh! Have fun! Keep the morale high and avoid nega-
tivism for the sake of the children and for your own sanity. Remember, Plum Creek Elementary is the only positive environment many of these children ever get to experience.

Because of such conscientious custodians, superb cafeteria workers, industrious teachers, and Plum Creek's wonderful secretary, the building is kept clean, the children are being fed, learning is taking place, and the paperwork is getting done.

Thanks for all your help.

These two letters are very telling for they reveal latent indications that I had begun to covertly struggle with the question of "Who am I?" as a principal. Even though both letters might seem stilted, they were written from the heart, denoting that I wanted to become a caring person again in my dealings with people, especially the children. They imply that I sincerely believed that the parents, students, faculty and I could, as a team, all work together and make changes, not through "technocratic ideology" (Wirth, 1983, p. 107) as I had done as an assistant principal but by "helping people become person's again" (Wirth, 1983, p. 217) through a more collaborative and collegial approach to administration. They suggest that parents, students, teachers and I could all grow through our own involvement.

And so, with simple undeveloped intent, I supported my staff in their enthusiasm towards carrying out numerous productive and exploratory projects. For example, at the teachers' suggestion, I encouraged them to collaborate on developing themes for the whole school, themes which would work to incorporate all areas of the curriculum—music, art, physical education, science, math, reading, writing, and social studies. One such theme involved the tropical rain forest. Thus, working together, the teachers and students gradually turned the main entrance of the school into a "Tropical Rain Forest." Palm trees, grape vines, mon-
keys, snakes, and other rain forest critters made by the students in art, along with their writings and drawings done in class made up the elaborate display. It generated numerous compliments and comments from parents and visitors.

Also, the school became involved in a year long alternative assessment project in the primary grades and the teachers began to study alternative methods of evaluating the students' progress through portfolios and "Take Home Journals." Portfolios included collections of the students' work and contained progressive samples of completed activities such as successive drafts of a paper written by the child (The Good Common School, 1993). The "Take Home Journal," an idea generated by the teachers involved in the alternative assessment project, acted as a three way method of communication between a particular student, his or her parent/s, and the teacher. Through its pages, the three different parties wrote telltale notes to each other. Sent home at the end of each week, the journal also served as a simple way of making a connection between the home and the school, thus acting as an uncommon method of parent involvement. The following is an entry from a first grader's "Take Home Journal":

Sept. 16, 1993

Dear mom,

This week I read to the Kindgrod I read to tow pepoe. I love 2d gard But I got a feyou warings But I'm still boing good.

your ghlei,
Darlene

PARENT PAGE
Parents, this is your very own page to write a letter to your child (please print). Remember to read your letter to your child. The more you write, the more your child will write. Happy writing ! ! ! !
Dear Darlene,

I think it was great you can read to the Kindergarten class and other people. I am so glad you love second grade. I hope you will have a wonderful year. Darlene, you must remember to have a successful year. You must be able to learn. To learn in class you must listen to Mrs. Vaughn, that means you can't be talking to other students while the teacher is teaching. We both set our goals, punishments and awards, concerning the star program.

Darlene I would like more details in your journal as what you have done that makes you proud. I also like to know what goes on in your Art class, gym class, and music class. I love you Darlene and I know you will continue to do great.

Love,
Mom

Dear Darl:

I am so glad your (sic) doing so well in school and you injoy (sic) it so much. I wish I was able to be more involved with your school work. Keep up the good work.

Love you,
Dad

P. S. work on the warnings. (Behave)

----------------------------------------

TEACHER COMMENTS

Dear Partner in Education,

Darlene is adjusting to second grade. She has some good ideas if she would take the time to put them in her journal it would be great. Darlene needs to work during work time and play during playtime. Please ask her each day if she got a star.

Thank you,
J. Vaughn

----------------------------------------

PARENT RESPONSE

Letter hand delivered by Darlene Tinsley Monday 9-20-93

Thank you
Charles
Tinsley
Examples of the childrens' writings and art projects filled the hallways. Students used the public address system in my office for morning and afternoon announcements, and the pledge of allegiance. They raised and lowered the flag every day. Each week the students sold supplies such as pencils, notebooks, and erasers. They contributed writing and drawings for the school newsletter, the Plum Creek Bulletin. The following articles are just a few examples snipped from one copy of an old newsletter [pseudonyms are used for the student's names]:

The Principal’s Desk

This year is quietly and quickly slipping away. We are nearing the end of the fourth six weeks reporting period and report cards will soon be sent home. January and February were filled with a variety of activities: candy sales, DARE graduation, standardized testing, yearbook distribution, and numerous readers and speakers visited the school.

Some exciting field trips and assemblies are planned for March as well as for upcoming months. Spring will soon be here, the fifth grade Washington trip is at hand, and summer vacation is not far off. This has been a fast and busy year. We look forward to working with you and your wonderful children to its completion.

Sincerely,
Luther Kehe

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Spotlight on a Star

A fifth grader who takes her job seriously as a safety patrol is Katy Orwell. Her teachers praise her without hesitation! Katy is commended for being dependable and conscientious about her duties. She feels her main responsibility is to "promote safety" among the students at Plum Creek School. She enjoys working with school personnel as well as with students. Her fantastic attitude shines through as a safety patrol and as a student.

Congratulations, Katy, for a fine job! Plum Creek is proud of you.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

The Following stories, poems and letters were written by students and are reproduced in their original form:
My First Day of School

My first day of school I was scared. I don’t no anyone. My teacher was named Mrs. Coak. She was nice. She ate lunch with us on Friday. I cryed the first day of school. I didn’t eat my lunch because my stumik hert. I was aferad that the other kids would no how to read and I won’t.

Love,
Kip Strong
(3rd Grade)

Natural Resources

One day Mr. Stillwell came and talked to us about coal. One thing that he said was that coal is mined from under ground. He told us that they build shafts where they make a hole and put up wood to keep it from caving in. Sometimes when you come out your face would be covered with soot. Some important uses of coal are electricity and steel.

Noah Stout
(3rd Grade, Mrs. Norris)

If I Were One Inch Tall
by . . . Iris Shelor

If I were only one inch tall
A soft green leaf would be my bed
I would sway and rest my tender head
If I were one inch tall

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Reading is Fun

Plum Creek was honored with a variety of readers in February for Reading Month including central office staff, parents, individuals from the community, and the principal. At the end of the month, Noah Late, actor and storyteller, presented a program of readings and fairy tales to the students. Cookies and punch were served.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Parenting Group

Plum Creek’s first grade parents were invited to a weekly parenting group in March from 11:30 - 12:30 p.m. to discuss self-esteem, communicating with children, discipline, and study skills. In a relaxed environment, parents discussed ways to improve parenting techniques.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
Motivating Your Child
Success comes from effort, not merely ability.

"Smart is not something you just are. Smart is something you can get."
This is a message parents need to give their children every day. In fact, children
who work hard at a subject often learn more than bright students who don't work
This message carries over to the rest of life as well. The highest achievers are
often those who have worked the hardest and done the most with the gifts they
have. *Smart is really something you can get.*

All children, regardless of ability or handicap, through full inclusion, a
school division policy, were welcomed into the regular classroom. Parent in-
volvement, a chronic problem at the school, became one of our main objectives.
Through volunteer and PTA programs, committee work, and other school activi-
ties, we welcomed parents into the school.

But, my basic school (Boyer, 1995) approach to administration seemed im-
possible and short lived with such subtle, and often not so subtle, messages as
the following arriving sporadically from central office: **Principals, get your
parents and teachers under control! You're the principal! You're
the authority figure! The cut off date for spending money is next
Monday. All monies not utilized by then must be returned.
Spelling and physical education scores are low county wide. Im-
prove them. Standardized test scores are lagging compared to
surrounding counties and cities. Develop a plan of improvement.
Reduce your accomplishments to a list for an annual report; the
school board wants to see your achievements.

So, with disdain, I looked back over our accomplishments and attempted
to reduce them to a list such as the following for an annual report to the school
board:
EVENTS/TRIPS/ACTIVITIES

Elmo the Clown
Will Mitchells - "Music Across the Pond"
Rabbit Woman - Native American dancer
Noah Late - story teller
Honor Roll Assembly - each six weeks
Summer Reading Program - Public Library
International Day
5th grade graduation
Mill Mountain Zoo (K)
Sesame Street - Roanoke Civic Center (K, 1, 2)
Geology Museum - VPI & SU (1)
"Book It," Pizza Hut (2)
Entomology Museum - VPI & SU (1, 2)
Play - Radford University (3, 4, 5)
Cruise on Claytor Lake - Pioneer Maid (3)
Planetarium - Radford University (4)
Art Exhibit - Radford (4, 5)
Harriet Tubman - play - Radford University (4, 5)
Doug Cruize - environmentalist
New River Valley Mall - guidance (5)
Auburn Middle School - orientation (5)
Bisset Park - Riner/Plum Creek picnic (5)
Washington, D. C. - 2 day trip (5)
D. A. R. E. Jamboree - Blacksburg (5)
Will Meek - WLSL/TV - weatherman
Mental Health Association of the New River Valley
Student Teacher Program - Radford University
Kroger/Plum Creek Bake Sale
Reading Month - February - "Love a Good Book"
Student Literacy Corps - Radford University

COMMUNITY INTERACTION

PTA Fall Festival
PTA Spagetti Supper and Talent Show
PTA and 5th grade - Christmas Craft Show
PTA Open House
PTA Candy Sales
Montgomery County Department of Parks and Recreation
Plum Creek Bulletin - school newsletter
Plum Creek yearbook
Community Halloween Party

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Easton Elementary School, Winston/Salem, N. C. - all teachers visited
Sally Mabry, Radford University - staff development
Corinna Plunket, Easton Elementary School, Winston/Salem, N. C. - staff development
Julie Barkley, Sadie Moses, Bob Masters - central office - staff development
Donald Graves, Charlotte, N. C. - "Portfolio Assessment" - 3 teachers attended
Whole Language Conference, Orlando, Florida - 2 teachers attended
Virginia State Reading Association, Virginia Beach, Virginia - 1 teacher attended

NEW PROGRAMS/CLASSES

Wee Deliver - a children's postal service system
Business Partnerships  (1) Kroger Company of Christiansburg
                   (2) Vaugh's Nursery of Dublin

HONORS/AWARDS

Academic - Presidential Physical Fitness Awards - 4 children received

Athletic - Presidential Physical Fitness Awards - 2 children received
           - National Physical Fitness Awards - 24 children received

Fine Arts/Drama/Forensics/Debate - PTA Reflections Contest - 5 winners
           - Fine Arts Center of the New River Valley - 5 participants

Teacher/Staff - Shirley Frank, Vice President, MCEA (1992-93)
               - CPR trainees - 2 teachers
               - Luther Kirk - Presenter - whole language workshop - Radford University
               - guest speaker - graduate class - Radford University

Yet, reduced to a list as a method of communication, how could my superiors ever appreciate the children who sat gaping with wide eyed wonder for forty-five minutes, captured completely by sophisticated opera singers upon the stage at a school assembly? How could they ever experience the thrill of seeing third graders excited over their first ride on Claytor Lake aboard the cruise boat "Pioneer Maid" or how ecstatic, but tired, the fifth graders were upon returning from a two day trip to Washington, D. C.?

From such a catalogue of events, the school board would never be able to appreciate how many parents and children had turned out for the community Halloween party, or the appreciation I felt when at one of the last PTA spaghetti suppers and talent shows, to show their appreciation, the parents gave me a gift cer-
tificate to my favorite restaurant and a standing ovation at the fifth grade graduation assembly. The school board and central office, from looking at a list of achievements, could never determine how thrilled, and empowered, my faculty seemed to be over helping to develop their own staff development program, visiting another school in Winston/Salem, North Carolina to study that school's reading program, attending the Donald Graves "Portfolio Assessment" workshop in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the annual meeting of the Virginia State Reading Association at Virginia Beach, Virginia, all professional growth opportunities.

How could an impersonal list of accomplishments adequately show the community spirit reflected in the beautiful Christmas tree donated to the school, or the cake and ice cream sent to the teachers by our business partners? How could such a list ever convey the experience of having a published author visit the school, the hissing sound of a hot air balloon filling up on a frosty morning, the thunder of a Lifeguard 10 helicopter hovering over the playing field for vehicle day, or, for that matter, the sweet bleating of new born lambs visiting the school from a nearby farm?

An annual report could never record the excitement generated over the "Wee Deliver" program, an in-house literacy project centering around letter writing, as the children wrote, stamped, sorted, and delivered the mail each week. Reduced to a slate of accomplishments, how could an annual report ever record the pride with which children claimed their academic and athletic certificates and diplomas at the end of each six weeks, and at the end of each year?

Least you be deceived, most certainly, life at the school did not always run smoothly. I dealt with many troubling situations for which there seemed to be no answers, or at least I had no answers for solving them. For example, I found my-
self tussling over discipline once again. Puzzled, I could never decide whether
the overcrowded conditions at the school created tension in the students or
whether the fighting carried over from the home. Parents, fathers mostly, en-
couraged their children, especially their sons, to protect themselves by using their
fists, and were quick to tell me so. Therefore, I counseled, conferenced, cau-
tioned, preached, and even suspended, but for some students nothing seemed to
help. I'm sure the fathers' bellicose attitudes sprang from many factors but I also
suspect that such pugnacity often simmered as the result of painful experiences
the men suffered in school as boys. Indeed, one mother related how she couldn't
get her husband to enter the school's doors. It brought back too many painful
memories of learning problems, paddlings, and verbal abuse from school figures.
Now, as a father, reentering the school after all those years still made him angry.

I grew concerned about my personal safety when one mad father threat-
ened a law suit and worse over a mix-up with another parent concerning a stolen
twenty dollar bill and a stack of football trading cards. Angry, pushy, and ready to
fight, I had to call the police. I grew tired of trying to calm such nonsupportive and
belligerent parents. They often came to the school over such minor incidences,
many times drunk and sullen, and threatening revenge, their home and commu-
nity problems and private vendettas creeping into the school with them.

I felt pity for the mother who attempted to run over another mother in the
parking lot, the result of a squabble over boyfriends. I grew furious when this
same woman embezzled money from the sale of candy, keeping almost two hun-
dred dollars of the school's money raised by her own daughter. As advised by
the school board's lawyer, the only recourses available to me included small
claims court, letter writing, or dropping the whole affair as a costly experience.
Later, this same person went to prison for stealing social security checks out of old folks' mail boxes.

My heart bled for the fourth grade boy who touched girls in private places, wrote suggestive notes to them, and once told a student teacher that he liked her "titties." When questioned about such sexual harassment behaviors, he denied them all. I felt even sadder for the father who, during a conference, accused the school of not liking his son while at the same time declaring: "He's just being a boy. I'd be worried about him if he didn't act that way." Conferences, counseling sessions, and private talks had little effect, and sending him to the guidance counselor seemed like plastering a band aide on a gaping wound, as it did with many the childrens' problems, since the guidance counselor only visited the school two days per week.

I felt absolutely helpless when faced with a drunken father who came to the school to pick up his incorrigible son, a first grader, being held over for misbehaving. During our conference the father confessed that he could not read or write and thus could not respond in his son's "Take Home Journal." And, he informed me, "His mother won't write in it 'cause she don't care and besides, she's always strung out on drugs." The father became irate when I reported the case to child protective services. A week later he beat the boy's mother unmercifully, sending her to the hospital. The family split up and the boy and his sister went to live with their grandmother but a month later the couple reunited and the squabbling and fighting continued, the children caught in the middle. He acted as a living example of how low literacy combined with "low expectations . . . [often] create a self-fulfilling prophesy for failure" (Bartoli, 1995, p. 111).
Struggling with teachers whom I thought to be ineffective turned into an emotional experience. One Chapter One reading teacher’s whereabouts, for example, had to be monitored very closely. Shared with another school, she always seemed to be lost or late. She cried each time I talked to her about it and became even more upset when she had to start checking in and out of the building using a time card and listing exactly where she would be going and what route she would be taking to get there. Granted, such belittling measures proved embarrassing for me as well as the teacher but there seemed to be no other recourse. Distressed, she eventually quit her job and returned to school.

Another teacher perplexed me. She became sullen and turned into a recluse when I spoke to her about the way she handled discipline in her classroom. I didn’t like the fact that each day, and every time I entered her space, the children seemed to be always wild and out of their seats. Her refusal to have someone help her work through the situation and design a plan of improvement hinged on insubordination. Her response, "The noise level doesn’t bother me." She eventually quit under bitter circumstances.

Finally, during the middle of my second year as a principal, even though I could count some positive changes, I grew weary of trying to please a bureaucracy, of constantly monitoring my environment, and of feeling "unreal . . . [for] the real me stood within the shadows to monitor as I asked myself from time to time, ‘How am I doing?’" (Williams, 1995, p. 90). In essence, I found myself grappling with several disunited abstractions once again. I felt I had become a supportive administrator and caring principal, yet an authority figure, a person in charge of other people, a subordinate to higher authority forced to carry out their directives concerning other people and ideas, yet an individual who had shied away from
total and complete control and power over others. As well, I had fought to free myself from those who held such control over me as an oppressed Appalachian and to rid myself of such control over others as a teacher. The triangular confusion circling around me as an individual, a teacher, and a principal made me feel uncomfortable and I knew that just as I had lost my identity as an Appalachian, a teacher, and my personal individualism, I had to recognize, reclaim, and salvage each personality. As a result, the desire to search for a more rewarding experience, which I felt for me included returning to graduate school, became too great and I wrote the following entry in my journal:

I have just about made up my mind to return to school. For some reason such a decision feels good. I am reluctant to tell the teachers however because they will be crushed. They make me feel really guilty but I have decided that I can't wait any more. I have been unhappy since I left school three years ago and it is time to get such feelings cleared up and move on with my life without wasting anymore time. At fifty, I don't have much time to waste. It may be the biggest mistake of my life but I must find that out for myself and quit all this questioning and worrying. The temptation to return to school is always there. And, if it is always there, then there must be a reason. I always feel restless, bored, and lacking.

Eventually, I told the faculty. The announcement came as a shock to them and turned into an ardent episode for us all. After the crying ended, one of the teachers came to me with this kind comment:

"Have you ever read a good book and you know its coming to an end and you don't want it to? That's how I feel about these past two
years with you here. I feel like a good book is coming to an end and I don't want it to."

In conclusion, I grew in experience while working three years in administration. I found out about myself as a teacher and as a person. On the whole, I learned that overcoming the bureaucratic mindset often shrouding such positions allows one to think about modification and seek ways to make perceived and troublesome situations better. And, in the long run, I learned that principals can exert their own changes, for principals do act as one important influence in setting the tone for their schools. But, new principals also inherit the faculty, students, parents, problems, and accomplishments of former administrators, as well as each group’s former influence on the school. It takes a while for old faculties, parents, and students to adjust to new ideas and to be swayed by fresh administrators. Consequently, new principals splash about, just like new teachers, seeking their own way of doing things and finding their own means of influencing people. And, just like new teachers, the evolving principles and philosophies of new administrators take time, talent, patience, and experience in getting established to bring about desired change.

Moreover, while working as an administrator I came to terms with my role as an educator. I know now that my heart lies in the classroom, as a teacher, not as an administrator. But that remark seems superficial in light of the many successes I had as an administrator and the collegial approach I took as a principal. I embraced the job as a believer in the philosophy statement I made to the teachers via the first letter I wrote to them: "We are all in this together." It troubles me that I didn’t feel more comfortable in my role as a principal. Certainly, I didn’t enter the position lightly. I took extra classes to get the principal endorsement
added to my teaching certificate; I listened to people who encouraged me; I re-
spected the support of my peers; I offered many years of teaching experience. I
sincerely believed that school should be a place where "everyone comes together
to promote learning" (Boyer, 1995, p. 15). Financially, such a move proved most
rewarding. But, money doesn't always feed every need of the human soul. I still
suffered from a feeling of unworthiness due to my Appalachian background, my
eyarly failures in school and my lingering fear of failure as an adult, and of being
cought between two worlds, that of administrator and teacher, all of which trans-
late into a lack of respect for, and trust in, myself and those who had faith in and
supported me. Writing about my classroom growth and development, my evolv-
ing teaching philosophy, my demeaning "technocratic" (Wirth, 1983, p. 107) ap-
proach as an assistant principal, and my stab at a more collaborative and coop-
erative pedagogy as a principal helped to clarify my fears and troubling insecuri-
ties as an educator. Such a reflective autobiographical sketch has made me feel
confident and content once again about entering any classroom, whether it be
fifth grade or higher education. Granted, such an entrance will be like starting
over for I have been away for a while in both body and soul. But, the reentry will
be grand and exciting!

As well, I learned that work in administration did not satisfy or take away
my desire for returning to graduate school. It seemed to make the craving worse.
Indeed, "as I considered and tried alternates, I found many of them superficial,
unreal, often pretentious, and sometimes hypocritical" (Williams, 1995, p. 91).
As a result, the need to return to advanced studies lay like an itch on an old hog's
back, seemingly unreachable but desperately needing to be scratched. Eventu-
ally, I had to roguishly arch my spine under the rail fence and scratch to my heart's content.

Nor, did administrative work provide the supernatural revelation, the epiphany, I so anxiously awaited, hoping that somehow, miraculously I suppose, an apparition would suddenly materialize and show me how to be happy and feel secure once again. The answer I sought lay within my own sights, my own decision making abilities. It included declaring a definite, final, and positive resolution about returning to graduate school and eventually the classroom. Only then could that wee guiding light, lit so many years ago by Mrs. Killgore when she quietly said "you can do it," flair up again and help me to fill the emptiness concerning my need to experience education as my way of proving myself to the world. For me, becoming more sure, and gaining peace with myself professionally and personally through education is contentment in and of itself.

Finally, I learned that one must pursue the natural course. But, the natural course is not always clear. I often wonder: Where would I be now had I satisfied my desire for higher education from the beginning and not returned to the classroom after my first year at the university? In hindsight, I think continuing on would have been the natural course. But, I let other concerns stand in my way---lack of money, family responsibilities, and other career pursuits---all important natural considerations too. Still, I did not listen to my heart. As a result, I remained unfulfilled until two year ago when I returned to Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University as an advanced graduate student.

And so, always wondering, always restless, always dissatisfied, and always caught between two worlds and within the dim remembrances of yesteryear, I have reached another turning point in my life, another beginning, another end.
But, in reality:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.  (Eliot, 1965)
Conclusion---Methods and Comments

Just as Mrs. Huertas, a participant in the El Barrio Popular Education Program, a community-based program of action research initiated by the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, City University of New York, expressed a desire "to inscribe her life, to write her story 'de mi puno y letra' (in her own hand)" (Benmayor, 1991, p. 163), so did I. And, autobiography seemed to be the best way for me to relate my story, forcing me into duet roles: researcher and storyteller. As the researcher, it authorized me to study my oppressed Appalachian culture, my fear, while at the same time desire, for leaving the mountains, my life as a displaced "urban Appalachian" (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 211), my growth as an educator, and my need to return to my Appalachian roots and the classroom in both body and soul. As the storyteller, autobiography granted me the freedom to tell about my life through narrative.

But, the "telling of a life is an artful and selective endeavor" (Van Maanen, Manning, Miller, 1989, p. 5). Therefore, I looked at several different theoretical frameworks to help me shape my thoughts and pose important questions. As the researcher, data collection involved numerous outlets and possibilities, all narratives themselves with other outlets and possibilities, and finally data analysis became an act of "'writing from the mind"' (Benmayor, 1991, p. 162) resulting in stories inside stories and stories between stories, all moving in circles, (Metzer, 1979) and all filled with history and action.

Theoretical Frameworks

To be sure, autobiographical writing is not new and seems to have been conceptualized in several different ways---"lived experience" (Manen, 1990, p. 27), "life history work" (Goodson, 1992, p. 6), and "life as narrative" (Bruner,
1987, p. 15)—to name but a few. But, for my purposes, I chose four theoretical frameworks for which I could easily identify in very intimate ways. They helped to guide my thinking in conducting this exclusive research project. They are: Freire's (1994) "pedagogy of the oppressed" (p. 30); Purcell-Gates's (1995) "sociocultural theory of learning" (p. 4); Bruner's (1990) theory of "folk psychology" (p. 35), and; Schubert's and Ayers's (1992) theory of "teacher lore" (p. vii).

Freire's (1994) "pedagogy of the oppressed" (p. 30) struggles with the idea of how oppressed individuals and groups might regain their dignity by throwing off the cloak of oppression smothering them and thus robbing them of their humanity. Such an "empowerment pedagogy" (Benmayor, 1991, p. 161) strives to make oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection hopefully will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their own liberation. In the struggle, this pedagogy will be made and remade (Freire, 1994) helping oppressed individuals to break free from their "culture of silence" (Shaull, 1994, p. 12). As an oppressed Appalachian I found myself caught in this "culture of silence" (Shaull, 1994, p. 12) striving for power as well as contentment.

Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy, a book narrated by a social science researcher, Victoria Purcell-Gates (1995) is the study, and story, of a family from Appalachia who could not read or write. Purcell-Gates focused her research upon the mother and the son. Conducted as a "literacy research" (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 204) project taking place over a two year period, she reported the research findings as a story. This research project, grounded in the "sociocultural theory of learning... suggests that all learning takes place within a social context, and to understand the process of learning, one must also specify and seek to understand the social context within which learning occurs" (Purcell-
Gates, 1995, p. 6). Furthermore, such a theory proposes that "all learners are seen as members of a defined culture, and their identity with this culture determines what they will encode about the world and the ways in which they will interpret information" (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 4). Such a biographical, as well as autobiographical, research project proved of particular interest to me since, as an oppressed Appalachian, I came from a low literacy family and had difficulty with all aspects of learning classroom tasks. I could identify with the frustrations experienced by the son in this study.

Another book, Acts of Meaning by Jerome Bruner (1990) embraces a theory functioning along the same lines as the "sociocultural theory of learning" (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 6). Bruner (1990) believes that culture shapes human life and the mind. His work is grounded in the theory of "folk psychology" (Bruner, 1990, pp. 35) and "its organizing principle is narrative" (Bruner, 1990, p. 35). He identifies "folk psychology" (Bruner, 1990, p. 35) as "the culturally shaped notions in terms of which people organize their views of themselves, of others, and of the world in which they live" (Bruner, 1990, p. 137). According to him we learn our culture's "folk psychology" (Bruner, 1990, p. 35) early. We learn it as we learn to use the language we acquire and to conduct the interpersonal transactions required in communal life (Bruner, 1990). Thus, as social scientists studying the human condition our research methods should include narrative for "narrative organizes experience, using human memory" (Bruner, 1990, pp. 35, 36).

Also, Bruner (1990) stresses that "folk psychology is supported by a powerful structure of narrative culture---stories, myths, [and other] genres of literature" (p. 138) and he recognizes the importance of autobiographical storytelling
as a research tool. His theory of "folk psychology" (p. 138) suggests that life is not so much a set of logical propositions as it is an exercise in narrative and storytelling (Bruner, 1990). Bruner (1990) emphasizes that "we seem to have no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of a narrative" (p. 12). He avows that "just as it is worthwhile examining in minute detail how physics or history go about their world making, might we not be well advised to explore in equal detail what we do when we construct ourselves autobiographically?" (p. 12). Bruner's theory not only offered me a way to explore my culture's folk psychology but supported autobiography as a way of writing about it too.

Finally, Teacher Lore: Learning from Our Own Experience edited by William H. Schubert and William C. Ayers (1992) acknowledges "the value of teachers' voices" (Schubert and Ayers, 1992, p. ix) and recognizes "autobiographical accounts . . . [as] the best sources for understanding teachers" (Schubert and Ayers, 1992, p. viii). The book is split into three parts. The first part begins autobiographically with one of the authors, Shubert (1992), remembering his own experiences as a beginning teacher. In the second part, teachers present their stories autobiographically through storytelling and narration. Using their own voices as teachers and researchers, they tell stories of individual lives and teaching experiences. The third part encourages other educators to learn from teachers' stories as well as their research and to expand on it in their own ways, by discussing innovative resources for doing teacher research (Schubert and Ayers, 1992). As a teacher, the idea of teacher lore seemed particularly appealing to me since "in understanding something so intensely personal as teaching it is critical we know about the person the teacher is" (Goodson, 1992, p. 4).
Each chosen theory for this research project presented a theoretical framework, a methodology, and encouragement in using narrative and storytelling as a voice for recording and reporting autobiographical studies. Each embraced a certain theory of research which took into account the human element, an element so important in social science studies. Each understood the importance of context (Mishler, 1979). In other words, they looked at stories as powerful research tools providing pictures of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems (Noddings and Witherell, 1991).

Questions of Inquiry

Preliminarily, I explored several questions: What is autobiographical research? It is the story of a person’s life written by himself or herself where the author is the researcher and narrator and the art of storytelling is used by the researcher as the rubric for reporting lived experiences. Why should autobiographical research be done? It serves as a means of emancipation and power and shows how culture influences one’s thoughts and ideas. Thus, it acts as a form of critical pedagogy. What does the literature say about autobiographical research? It says that such research is the result of a constructive tumult taking place in the human sciences allowing a search for different possibilities of making sense of human life, for other ways of knowing which do justice to the complexity, tenuousness, and indeterminacy of most human experience (Lather, 1986). How should autobiographical research be carried out? It should be done through the process of reflective analysis but take shape in written form through the art of storytelling or the "narrative mode" (Bruner, 1986, p. 13). And, is autobiographical research really research? Absolutely! It acts as a question poser for the social
sciences and allows for hypothesizing about the causes of difficulties encountered in life and helps to generate questions of inquiry related to those causes.

Such inquiry helped me to shape my thoughts and clarify in my mind what I thought autobiographical research might be. What I discovered is that autobiographical research emphasizes the value of a person’s own story and provides pieces for a "mosaic" or total picture of a person’s life, and gives an inside view of a person's culture. The purpose of such research is to discover important questions, processes, and relationships not to plan for or prove them (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). As such, autobiographical research studies are personal commitments and acts of discovery. Therefore, the research questions evolve with the study, becoming circular and recursive, forcing the researcher to focus and refocus.

To be sure, autobiographical research is biased. But, Lather (1986) tells us that "there is no neutral research" (p. 257): and, Purcell-Gates (1995) acknowledges "that no research is free of bias [for] even the very questions one asks and the data one perceives as significant are driven by theoretical perspectives" (p. 204). Our task as autobiographical researchers is to collect data from "various methods to minimize bias and strengthen the validity of the findings" (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 204). Another angle is to look at the sources of bias as data in themselves for just as important as to whether an account is accurate or objective is what it tells us about the teller’s perspectives and presuppositions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989).

Indeed, telling our stories autobiographically makes us vulnerable. But, as narrators, we have stories to tell which were shaped by our culture, the way we speak, our sexual differences, our convictions, our race, and our life histories
(Witherell and Noddings, 1991). In essence, we can pick and choose the events we want to include in our life stories and the style in which we want to present them. However, we must not abuse the privilege. We must verisimilarly tell an honest story written from the heart which includes happiness, joy, discouragement, and sorrow for such honesty makes us human. And, such "stories can teach us about caring---for ourselves, for others, for our history, and for our future" (Witherell and Noddings, 1991, p. 9).

If we tell our stories truthfully and honestly our flaws and weaknesses are most certainly revealed but our strengths and accomplishments are shown as well. In the end, telling an honest story written from the heart and revealing simple truths about our life reinforces the notion that we live and grow in interpretive, or meaning-making communities. In addition, our stories help us to find our place in the world and such caring, respectful dialogue serves as the crucible for our coming to understand ourselves, others and the possibilities life holds for us now and in the future (Witherell and Noddings, 1991).

Finally, we have a need to fictionalize ourselves and to become stars or heroes. This is the reason "human beings cannot keep from telling their stories" (Murphy, 1993, p. 80) and why all "human science has a narrative quality" (Mannen, 1990, p. 115). It depends on storytelling for recording and reporting data. These stories, fictionalized or true, are more or less, insightful and useful in shaping what we think and do (Cherryholmes, 1993) for "stories create a reality of their own" (Bruner, 1986, p. 43). Furthermore, Murphy (1993) reminds us that:

all writing---whether lyric or lab report---is creative to the extent that it shapes words, data, arguments into meaning. . . . To draw a sharp line between fiction and nonfiction, therefore, is to misrepre-
sent both. Essays are not about a real world, stories about an imagined. Both are imagined worlds composed from the materials of the real. (p. 72)

Recognizing the non-neutrality, fictive nature, vulnerability, and creativity of autobiographical research, and indeed all research, numerous questions seemed to materialize and take shape as I reflected, researched, and wrote about my life as an oppressed Appalachian and as a teacher and administrator. The questions seemed to swirl outward like storm clouds before a hurricane from my most central autobiographical concern: Who am I? That complex question, as simple as it might seem, spawned other questions. Who am I as an Appalachian, a man, a father, a teacher, a husband? Who am I in relation to the characters who have influenced my life and made me who I am? How has the context, or the setting into which I have been born, influenced who I am? From what point of view do I see myself? In other words, how do I visualize myself in my own mind? What sequence of events, or plots, have led me to where I am today? What is the central theme of my life? What has the tone of my life been like? Have I been positive? Negative? Confident? Sure? Lonely? Afraid? What mode of expression, or style, do I use to express myself? How do I tell my story?

In essence, autobiography proved to be a freeing action in assisting me to research my life, to tell my story, and to struggle with the question anew: Who am I? It made me want to find out more about why and how culture played such an important role in shaping my life. What happened to me as an individual psychologically, socially, and emotionally to make me become ashamed or afraid of my culture? What happened to my self worth, suffering because of the way I viewed my Appalachian culture, or imagined how other people viewed it? What
happened to make me experience such difficulty in school? As a child I struggled for learning. Until recently I could not talk about being retained in school because of the guilt and shame I felt. Held back two years in a row, pushed to the rear of the class, and told overtly and covertly that I could never make it, I viewed myself as being "dumb" and to this day the word infuriates me. How did such derogatory comments affect me as a classroom teacher? I associated my difficulties in school with my Appalachian background and family. Why? Why did I want to flee all those painful experiences, to give up my Appalachian identity? Why did I develop such a restless, wandering spirit, always distrustful, always bored, always dissatisfied? How can I as an oppressed individual, as indeed all of us are at some point in our lives, avoid becoming an oppressor of the oppressed? But, the irony of all this questioning seems to be, why did such oppression become my driving force, making me to reach beyond myself, to prove my self worth, and to shudder at the word "dumb?"

In summary, I chose autobiography as a way of seeking my own freedom through questions of inquiry and as a method of learning how to learn about myself as an oppressed Appalachian, my culture, and myself as a teacher, and administrator. Such learning, and learning how to learn, gave me freedom from oppression. Hence, it helped me to revisit again and again the main question "Who am I?" and to pose new stories—new questions. For, as individuals we live our lives through our stories and we struggle to understand ourselves, others, and our world in terms of them (Randall, 1995). In short, people who have been provoked to reach beyond themselves, to wonder, to imagine, and to pose their own stories and questions, as I did throughout this research project, are the ones most likely to learn how to learn (Greene, 1988).
Data Collection

Opening an ornate antique trunk tucked away in some dusty attic filled with cobwebs might be an apt way to describe the method of data collection realized for conducting this autobiographical research project. Used for storing memories for the past fifty years but opened occasionally for perusal, and to add more junk, such a memory box offers valuable insights into a person's history.

When my life began over half a century ago, that's when the data for my life story began filling the trunk. Along with my long forgotten and discarded old rags for diapers and worn out, faded, and dingy hand-me-down baby clothes, stories began to circulate about my birth: about how Ruth went across the hill to fetch a slow midwife; about how my sister Val danced with nervous anticipation as the old midwife arrived late; and, about how I appeared early by sliding out as Mrs. Rothberry, the midwife, slid in though a hole in the fence.

Actually, the stories began before my birth, secretly hushed into obscurity during some dark, late night encounter when:

Of course it was hard to make love
with the children in the room
but that didn't keep them from trying,
and they were pretty successful,
some would say,
since they had... [ten] kids now.
He would begin it by reaching over
and softly pulling at a slender piece of
her long hair,
wrapping it in his fingers,
and then,
dead tired but still in love,
they would turn toward each other and,
nestled in the warm breathing
of their other babies,
ease their weary minds
with the sex
they knew would likely make them
poorer
and richer
all the same time. (Rylant, 1994, p. 22)

When my mother first felt me, her eleventh pregnancy, tapping, pushing,
kicking, and moving from her warm cramped insides, I often wonder how she felt.
Did the discovery elate her, depress her, or make her simply sigh with disbelief
and say, "My god, how will we ever feed, clothe, and shelter another child?"

Data collection continued, mostly through oral stories but some through old
and faded black and white snapshots and harbored memories from aging family
members. Eventually school papers, lesson plans, dog-eared textbooks, report
cards, yearbooks, diaries, maps, discharge papers, diplomas, and birth certifi-
cates joined the growing pile of memorabilia. Newspaper clippings, colored pic-
tures, birth announcements, marriage certificates, recipes, notes, toys, poems,
songs, phonograph records, journals, logs, a sausage grinder, a cut glass candy
dish, a cracked earthenware churn, a cast iron bedstead, an old spindly-legged
dresser, a box of old quilt tops, and even a clump of bright yellow flowers rounded
out the clutter of a life.
Data collection endured as I read, reread, wrote, and rewrote. One book sequenced another book; one writing acted as a transition into another writing. One discussion yielded other discussions and spawned other ideas. Long walks kept the thought processes moving, creating more ideas, more memories, more writings, more readings. I have a brown manila file folder stuffed full of pithy saying scratched quickly onto "Stick On Notes" and other scraps of paper: 

*The flashing lights; they fill my head/Am I lost or am I dead? Autobiography connects the autobiographer to his or her roots—to his or her culture.* By choice such crude note taking became one key method of writing down ideas and sayings before they flew from my thoughts forever. I rummaged through closets and cupboards, searched the recesses of my mind, listened to taped recordings, pilfered other people's thoughts, dug about in battered file cabinets, and sorted through piles of memories. I made various phone calls. I traveled down home and visited many family members. Often I climbed the rocky lane to the old home place once again, only to find the house a collapsing, decaying heap of irrevocable memories. I reread both my preliminary exam and my dissertation prospectus examination and discussed my project with many people. I used reams of paper and dozens of ink cartridges.

And then, eventually, gradually, laboriously, and pensively I reconstructed my life, gluing the snippets, snatches, and glimpses into a collage of life experiences concentrating on those stories which I thought most impacted my life—family, Appalachia, schooling, the military, college, classroom teaching, and administration. Through narratives I attempted to piece together an autobiographical jigsaw puzzle of a thousand pieces with many of the pieces still missing. But the incomplete puzzle seems even more intriguing for it is one filled with colorful
as well as muted remembrances of things past leading up to the present but understanding who I am a wee bit better for the future.

Data Analysis

In writing this autobiographical account of my life, data analysis became an act of writing from the mind, (Benmayor, 1991) of telling many once untold stories, of writing down in my own hand numerous oral discussions. My Appalachian culture and the poverty of my early existence in the mountains, tempered by the beauty of the physical environment surrounding me, became my rallying points (Benmayor, 1991). The struggle over leaving home, doing so, attempts at totally abandoning my roots, and finally striving to reclaim them motivated my thought processes. The controlling and dangerous power of oppression and how I could so fleeting flit like a shadow, without forethought, from the role of oppressed to that of oppressor became my problem statement. Furthermore, military life and schooling developed as two other major themes of testimony (Benmayor, 1991). And finally, sharing both painful and joyful memories, recognizing curious turning point moments, puzzling over strange epiphanies, and acknowledging the impact of numerous significant others proved that no person’s life “is ever an individual production. It derives from larger group, cultural, ideological, and historical contexts” (Denzin, 1989, p. 73).

Indeed, analyzing the data composing my life story exposed the power of my Appalachian culture which grounded my life, shaped my thoughts and ideas, and influenced everything I chose to do. For certain, my past followed me into the classroom. It appeared in the stories I selected for study—my culture—revealed itself in my harsh and demanding ways—my father’s voice—and bared it-
self in my need for hard work for myself and for my students---my mother's influence. It dogs me daily as I deal with my own family and personal needs.

But, in writing the story of my life, what I have really discovered about myself as an oppressed Appalachian searching for meaning is that I can only partially answer the obscure question: Who am I? Indeed, it seems to be my very reason for living---my personal quest. Such ambitiousness proves impossible for if the question were fully answered then there would be no reason left to live. I am a survivor. I am an evolving and changing being. I am the recording and reflection of the culture which helped to shape me as well as the many experiences I have endured in life. Furthermore, the real question is: Do I really want to know who I am? For, what havoc will the answers reek?

On occasion I return down home and retrace my steps to the old Kirk farm now lying forsaken on the side of Barton Mountain. The footpath from the main road still snakes its way up the bumpy, rocky lane to the house. Along the way, poison oak strangles each fence post and jabs with itchy fingers at every careless passerby. Ragweeds, briars, and bushes crowd in on either side. Tall grasses reach over, gently touching and wetting my shoes as I pass by.

I make my way past the rotting roots of a gigantic oak. Split in two from top to bottom, felled in old age by a swift stroke of lightning several years ago, it once stood at the mouth of the lane. Blackberry briars, Queen Anne's lace, and locust seedlings choke the life out of Mom's once thriving vegetable and flower garden at the back of the house. Dad's rambling red rose bush which one time grew by the front porch is dead.

I wander across the wild front yard and stand before the decaying house, smothering quietly amid the blankets of leafy green bushes pushing in and bunch-
ing around it. Climbing the unsound and crooked wooden steps to the sagging front porch I pensively gaze across the changing valley. Iron Mountain stands strong and big against a blue eastern sky under a blazing sun. Bear Ridge looms up before me to the south and the thick Plummer Woods lie quiet and still in the foreground. To the west Rich Hill, scraggly and overgrown, seems distant, forlorn, and lost before the higher ridges in the background. I feel the presence of Barton Mountain behind me.

I rest for a while, looking back in time, staring into part of my history. From the quiet solitude I hear sorrowful but optimistic whisperings: You have risen above it all yet you will forever be haunted by this place. It is part of who you are---your soul, your mind, your spirit. You have journeyed far from these protective hills, high mountains, and secluded coves and hollows; you have become more educated, more sophisticated. But, part of you still resides in Appalachia. You will always be caught between two worlds, dissatisfied, restless, unsure, and forever wandering and wondering. And, you will always struggle with oppression, with whether you are the oppressed or the oppressor. That will remain your life challenge. But, you will survive for you are independent, self-reliant, and proud. You are an Appalachian.

In closing, the following anonymous note from one of my committee members found its way into my hands at the end of my dissertation prospectus examination. It acts as a fitting end to this autobiographical sketch:

\textit{Luther,}  
\textit{I like your study.}  
\textit{I think it is courageous and creative.}  
\textit{I think it is risky.}  
\textit{I think it is well grounded and has direction although "not a plan."}
I believe it will contribute greatly to your growth
and
I believe I will learn much from it—
I then predict others will too.

P. S. Your style is pleasant and invitational. It keeps me wanting
to read more.
Your work is also bothersome to me personally as it is a
challenge to become more autobiographical for many
reasons. I need it for personal growth as well as
professional. I have used it with students several times.
Many have benefited because of the power of the method
in spite of my feeble attempts to support their efforts,
although I have always been smart enough to let the method
do the work and I assume only a bit part in the process.

Even given these motivations, I still resist turning myself
loose. I wonder why? Maybe your dissertation will help me
answer that question.

If my simple story, written by a common Appalachian, addresses and of-
fers answers to the writer’s final question, then perhaps the writer, and indeed all
of us, will come to understand that as evolving, changing beings:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. (Eliot, 1965, p. 114)
Resource List


Kirk, Web E. *The descendants of Ptolemy Kirk and Emily Nickels.*


Vita

Born March 15, 1945, I am the eleventh child from a family of fourteen, counting two step-brothers. I was born at home in Smyth County, Virginia and attended the public school system there. After graduating from high school in 1965 I joined the United States Coast Guard and moved to Boston, Massachusetts where I was stationed for four years. I relocated to St. Petersburg, Florida after my release from military service and attended St. Petersburg Junior College in St. Petersburg, using money granted to me from the G. I. Bill. Later, I transferred to the University of South Florida in Tampa, eventually earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in English.

After graduating from the University of South Florida, I returned to Virginia and, in 1978, completed work at Radford University for a Master of Science degree in Upper Elementary Education. I taught elementary school for eleven years in the Montgomery County Public School System and then worked for three years in administration, both as an assistant principal and as a principal in the same county. In 1990, I entered graduate school at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and in 1996 received a Doctorate in Education from the College of Human Resources and Education.

Currently, I reside in Pulaski, Virginia with Katy, my wife, Andrew, my son, and Maggie, my daughter.

Luther R. Kirk