

## *More Stories!*

**Forum**

**Number 58**

**May, 2008**

# Heaven On a Hilltop

Appalachian life in 2008

By Richard "Clipper" Naegele

*I dedicate this short story to "Boots and Foster" with love and admiration.*

A mist hangs over the mountain top, and the air is crisp. Sammy saddles the old mule and heads down the holler toward the local store. Sammy is legally blind, and barely sees, but the mule is sure-footed and carries him safely down the hill past the other farms and out to the main road. It is quiet and peaceful as the mule clip clops along slowly. The birds are just starting to awaken, and stretch their wings. The doves can be heard rustling in the pine trees where they have roosted for the night. As he passes his neighbor Gerry's house, there are no signs of life yet, except for the riding horse grazing in his pasture, and the dogs that come to welcome Sammy and the mule, and to accompany them to the next bend in the road.

Sammy has to dismount to open the cattle gate, as he enters his neighbors land, and as he leads the mule

through, he can smell bacon cooking at the Collier's farm. As he passes by, his neighbor waves from the back porch, and hollers a cheery good morning, while grabbing an armload of wood for the cookstove. The chickens scatter, clucking angrily, as Sammy passes through the Collier's dooryard.

As they round the next bend, a doe and her fawn are grazing on the lush green grass along the roadside, and scurry for cover when they see Sammy and the mule. As the road drops into the creekbed, the mule stops and sips from the spring fed, bubbling stream, where it meanders through a glade lined with hemlocks. A male cardinal, in all of his bright red plumage, perches on a fence post, and chirps them a good morning greeting. The mule picks his way carefully along on the gravel bottomed stream for about 100 yards to a point where the road once again climbs out of the creek bed and crosses one more pasture before reaching the hard paved road and civilization.

The mule knows the way to the store from here, so Sammy rolls himself a cigarette, and relaxes. No more gates to open, or creeks to cross. When Sammy arrives at the little market, the owner, Billy Joe, comes out to help him into the store. Sammy grabs a seat in a booth, sips a coffee, and munches on a sausage biscuit, while Billy Joe fills the grocery order, picking items from the shelves as Sammy hollers them out. His weekly order consists of cornmeal, flour, buttermilk, spam, canned corned beef, a couple of ham hocks, and some dry beans. A couple of cans of cigarette tobacco, and some rolling papers, and the shopping is done. Billy Joe packs the goods in Sammy's saddle bags, and collects his money. Billy's wife Shelley hollers from the back, that the fresh biscuits just came out of the oven. Sammy grabs a fresh hot biscuit with apple butter to savor on his trip back up the mountain.

On the way back home, Sammy stops at the rack containing the mailboxes belonging to Sammy and his three neighbors on the mountain. As he approaches George's place, George is digging potatoes from the potato pit to take in the house for the days cooking. People on the mountain grow most of their own vegetables to can, and preserve potatoes and turnips by burying them in a large pit, covering them with sand to keep them for the winter. A heaping pick up truck load of potatoes was placed in the pit in the fall, and as summer wears on, the pit is getting down. There is probably only about 300 pounds left to get the family through to fall, and a new crop. George carefully shovels the sand onto a tarp and places the taters in a bucket. The sand pile is covered and saved

to be re-used in the fall.

Sammy gives George his family's mail, and after a quick chat about the weather, and the day's plans, he moves on. As the mule climbs the steepest part of the mountain road, Foster Collier comes to the gate in the picket fence to get his mail. Sammy says, "I will be back down in a while to help with the hay".

Foster says, "Gerry is up on the hill now, turning it over with the rake, so the dew can dry off of it. He has to get the hay raked, and then he needs to saw some hemlock on the bandsaw mill, for George. George is building a new pole barn. George brought the logs up yesterday and said he had the poles cut and ready to set. As soon as we get all the hay in, it will be time to get that barn built before winter sets in again."

Sammy says, "Cya later. I have to get back home and put on a pot of brown beans with some onion and a hamhock. I can let them simmer on low all day, while we are putting in hay, and tomorrow, I can bake some cornbread and have soup beans and cornbread to bring down for lunch. Tell Boots (Foster's wife) not to fuss for our lunch today, I will bring down a couple of canning jars of greenbeans and taters, and all she will have to do is make some biscuits and fry up some spam or something."

Boots comes out on the porch and says, "Dick and Kathy just called, and they said they will be here in an hour to help with the hay, and Wanda and Tex are coming too. Kathy baked her apple cake, and made a macaroni salad, so I will just cut up some fresh "maters" and slice up some cukes, and along with the rest of the stuff we will have enough for everyone to eat."

Wanda and Tex are Foster and Boots' daughter and son in-law. James is from Texas and we all call him Tex. He drives a Ford 4X4 with a cow skull mounted on the roll bars. Gerry is one of the Collier sons, and he lives next place up the mountain, and keeps track of ma and dad. Foster can't work the way he used to. He suffers from black lung and a bad back. He worked in the coal mines all his life. Their son Bucky also worked the mines until he was struck by a falling rock and broke his back. Gerry worked the mines, and suffers with back trouble also. It is not unusual to have a bad back when working the mines of SW Virginia and West Virginia. Many of mines used to be small independent mines, and the ceilings were low, forcing the miners to be bent over in a space only about 4 to 5 foot tall all day.

The Collier farm is the homestead. All of the kids were born and raised there. They walked the mile and a half out to the main road everyday to catch the schoolbus, and worked before and after school. The homestead sits atop a hill, overlooking a hollow. Sammy lives on a small farm farther up the mountain. Town was a once a week trip for mom and dad, and shopping was only for necessities. Boots makes her own bread and biscuits, and they always slaughter their own beef and pork. they make their own sausage and smoke their own hams. They hunt deer and wild turkeys on the mountain, and are seldom in need of much storebought food. Shopping is usually for toilet paper, staples such as flour, yeast, and corn meal, and a few luxury items such as cereal and icecream.

On the way to "heaven on the hilltop" you turn off the paved road. You need a high ground clearance vehicle so I usually take my 4X4 truck. The road through the hollow and up the mountain is a two track dirt path. I drops into the creek for about 100 yards, and then climbs back out to meander along a ledge carved out of the sidehill. You bounce over large rocks, and through red clay mudholes, past grazing cow, and have to stop 3 times to open and close cattle gates.

As you approach the house, you can look up above you about 100 feet up on the side of the hill and see the homestead. A large old fashioned farmhouse with a long porch across the whole front of the house. The sun shines on the bright, white clapboards, and glints on the freshly painted red metal roof. The hill is so steep, that there is a switchback in the road rather than going straight up the hill. That front porch is the headquarters for all fair weather conferences and conversations. It is where the men smoke or chew, and the women chat and peel apples for pie. The house and large vegetable garden are surrounded by picket fence on one side, and barbed wire on the other three, because the house sets in the middle of the farm, and the livestock is fenced out of the yard and garden.

They cut their own firewood, grow their own vegetables, kill their own meat, cure their own hams, raise their own chickens and gather fresh eggs. they have a coal shed where they keep huge lumps of coal, straight from the mines down the road. They break it up with a sledge whenever they need it for the house. they work hard, play hard. They love their neighbors, their family, their friends and their God.

The house on the hill, at the head of the hollow, is truly "Heaven on a hilltop"! It is my favorite place in the whole world to go. The company is extraordinary, the air is fresh, and when you shut off your truck upon

arrival, there is nothing but the fresh air, cool breeze, and sounds of nature, to soothe your soul. It is a life simple. While the outside world fights, cheats, lies, and betrays their neighbors, the people up the hollow on Collier's mountain, simply shake their heads as they watch the tv news. They shake their heads and then bow those same heads in prayers of thanks, for the blessings that God has given them, and the acreage so close to heaven.

This story is basically non-fiction. The names have been changed, but the characters portrayed are real people. While not all statements are entirely accurate, the lifestyle is accurately portrayed. "Sammy" lives at the top of the road, and even with his very impaired vision, he manages and the neighbors look out for him. "George" and his family live just below the "Colliers" and has small children. The three families work together as one. The Collier children all come back to "the mountain" every weekend to do the farm work, and to help out "Boots and Foster".

For those of you not familiar with life in Appalachia, this is a wonderful way to live. These people don't depend on outside help. They don't even really have to depend on electricity, as they burn coal and wood for heat, and have kerosene lamps for the frequent power outages that happen in the rural mountain areas. While they are content to have electricity and phones, they can take it or leave it. While I expound on some of the details about the local store, which is actually a convenience store nearby, the rest of the story is basically true. I have been there, and Kathy and I love and admire these folks and their way of life. The kids know what hard work is. They don't have to have a video game to entertain themselves. They have all the modern conveniences and games, but are taught the ways of the land, and the simple but important things in life, like family and a life guided by God and good sense.

This is like a story from "Walton's Mountain", except that it takes place today. The Colliers have a late model pickup truck, and modern appliances and farm equipment. They live a semi primitive life, and a simple life, but it is a wonderful and fulfilling life. Love abounds, as does true appreciation of nature. Those of us that live in the towns and cities, have no idea of the value of fresh air and homegrown food. When we can no longer afford gasoline, the folks on the mountain will simply hook Sammy's mule to the older horse drawn equipment, throw a log on the fire, and sit back fat and happy, watching the rest of us struggle. When the grocery stores are empty due to high fuel costs and truckers strikes, the potato pit, fruit

cellar, and pantry won't be.

When we all are starving, and can't survive and thrive without fuel, and power, the Colliers and their neighbors will simply park the pickup, fill the back of it with dirt, and plant some petunias. Sammy's mule will do the farm work, and the wood and coal on the mountain will keep them warm and contented. Right there in "Heaven on a Hilltop".

When the sun goes down on the mountain, you can sit on the porch, far from the rumble of highway traffic and listen to the night birds, and the coyotes. You can watch the deer come out of the woods to graze among the cows. and almost hear your own heartbeat, in the peaceful quiet that falls over the mountain at sunset.

The hay is put away in the barn. The supper dishes are done, and the girls are on one end of the porch chatting, while myself and the men are on the other end, telling tales and jokes. As darkness falls, Kathy and I have to leave. I don't like navigating the narrow dirt road in the dark. Sammy has gone back up the hill to his house to feed his stock and put the mule away for the day. It is nightfall on the mountain, and time for Kathy and I to go back to the hustle and bustle that lies down the blacktop road, back in Bristol. Headlights and brightly lit signs, break the peaceful trance of our day away from the rat race. As we head for home, I start looking forward to the next time we come to visit. I stop and get us a coffee to sip on the 60 mile trip home, and we jump back on a four lane highway, dodging coal trucks and plugging our ears to the roar of motorcycles and pickups with loud mufflers. Reality has set back in, and all that comes to mind is a gnawing envy for that lifestyle that is close to nature, and close to our creator.

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