Realms of Enchantment

Day 67- Jerry's Road House in Mount Sterling, Kentucky is improbably located amidst a warren of chain outlets at a major highway intersection along Interstate Route 64. TomTom found Jerry's and we welcomed its down-home menu including the chicken livers, corn pudding and fried yams I had, foods as far as I know not found in any chain restaurant. These are all fond American favorites so why doesn't a chain restaurant offer them? For sale by the cash register were locally made birdhouses, sorghum syrup, and homemade yo-yos. Amidst this sprawl of Interstate exit chain outlets, Jerry's seems to be doing fine. It hosts the weekly meeting of the town's Rotary club so it must have good local support. ☆☆, "good," for Jerry's.

After lunch we passed into West Virginia and not far past Charleston, the capital, headed for Kanawha State Forest Campground. (Seneca: Kah-NAW-ha, "solar deity of light and truth") The roads from I-64 to the campground become progressively more rural, relaxing from middle class 1960s homes on suburban streets, to tiny hamlets on narrow roads, to small poorer homes and old trailers on substandard roads, to the park whose road got better, and finally, at the dead end of the road, to the sleepy narrowing "holler" where the campground is located. Early on was a sign warning that the road is not advised for anything over twenty-six feet. Though a tight road for its last few miles, getting here was nevertheless another sapphire road experience. The only campground on either trip more remote than this was at Valley of Fire State Park in a far corner of the Nevada desert.

Kanawha State Forest Campground is strung out along a small rippling creek with most sites adjacent to the water. The glen in which the campground is located is formed by steep striated hillsides with some rock strata dropped to form shallow caves. Trees on the hillsides are dense, starving each other for light limiting their growth, but those on floor nearest the campground road are large from the sunlight in the clearing. After getting set up in this most idyllic campground yet, we went for a walk exploring the rest of the beautiful glen that the map says is "Number One Store Hollow," not to be confused with Number Two Store Hollow three miles distant.

Returning from our walk, we got to know two friendly ducks, a mating pair living in the creek by our site who through the evening would groom, nap, court and just live duck life. We gave them bread that they happily devoured. This pair looks well fed. Ms. Duck has only a stump for one leg and gets around perfectly well hobbling but in the creek tends to paddle in circles.

The hollow we are in is called that, a hollow, on the forest map but people in Appalachia, at least from Virginia on south, usually say "holler." I grew up hearing it as "holler" because my parents, though urbanites, believed that people who actually live back in the hollers have first right to claim preferred pronunciation, so in our family hollow became holler except when any fussy company was present.

The holler folk in the Virginia, West Virginia and Carolina Appalachians are mostly descendants of Scots-Irish immigrants of the late eighteenth century who received that cool welcome or less by the English and English-descended Americans along the eastern seaboard. Outcasts where they came from and again upon arrival in America, they kept moving west to sparsely populated areas where they could live more or less as they pleased, and became the main group who populated the Appalachians. These Scots-Irish immigrants were mostly poor, rough, resourceful people who were up to the challenges of pioneer remoteness, hardship, and hewing their livelihoods from wilderness in difficult vertical terrain that others forsook. They relied on primitive hunting and gathering for subsistence, or farm crops and gardens that often didn't do well in rocky mountainside soils. Poverty, malnutrition, high childhood mortality and other of the toughest of hardships were a way of life taken for granted. But they had their music, barn dances, hoedowns, choirs, marksmanship contests, strong kinship ties, and a deeply cherished if isolated freedom, all stewing up into an important American subculture from holler to holler.

In 1933, University of Chicago sociologists Mendel Sherman and Thomas Henry did the first close-up study of hollow folk as they named their resulting book. I grew up with *Hollow Folk*, a book of special fascination to me in my parents' one-bookcase library, and I've reread it several times over the years. Sherman and Henry dove in, for two years going on foot in the roadless territory as far back into the hollers as the hollers went in the central Virginia Appalachians. They lived with holler folk, got to know them, learned their ways, earned their trust, and wrote their fascinating book that gained broad sales and readership by the not-that-distant urban countrymen of the book's subjects. The five hollers they got to know are fewer than a hundred miles from the nation's capital.

What Sherman and Henry found was a deliberately isolated subculture that loathed outside authority and interference, but had progressed culturally very little or, in the most remote hollers, actually regressed into a hard, very primitive existence less organized than that of the most primitive peoples on other continents. Said the authors in 1933,

> "The dark interior valleys of the Blue Ridge Mountains are realms of enchantment.
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> Here hidden in deep mountain pockets, dwell families of unlettered folk, of almost pure Anglo-Saxon stock, sheltered in tiny, mud-plastered log cabins and supported by a primitive agriculture. One of the settlements, Colvin Hollow [the authors' pseudonym] has no community government, no organized religion, little social organization wider than that of the family and only traces of organized industry. The ragged children, until 1928, had never seen the flag or heard the Lord's Prayer. They speak a peculiar language that retains many Elizabethan expressions.
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> "The community is almost completely cut off from the current of American life. It is not of the twentieth century. Both in time and space it seems to be isolated and self-sufficient. The very existence of Colvin Hollow was hardly recognized by officials of the Virginia county within whose boundaries it is included."

In the sixties and seventies, my cousin Walter Michael was a Volunteers In Service to America (VISTA) volunteer in the southern West Virginia village of Welch tucked back among the Appalachians where West Virginia, Virginia and Kentucky adjoin. This area is now the poorest of mining country where coal companies scalp entire mountains, dump mining byproduct into streams wrecking them, skimp on mine safety time after time and, when a place is mined out, pull out and leave it ruined with hundreds if not thousands unemployed to be supported by the taxpayer.

The settlements near Welch are named after wildlife, states of mind, faraway places, Native Americans, foods, even the weather with names like Panther, Elkhorn, Black Wolf and Beartown, War and Worth, English and Yukon, Cucumber, Johnnycake and Yerba, Skygusty, Northfork, Bottom Creek, Canebrake, Rockridge and Twin Branch, Powhatan, Mohegan and Mohawk, of course Coalwood, and—who knows why?—Six, just Six.

Walt has his stories of McDowell County of which Welch, population about 2,300 and dropping, is the seat and largest town. What drew Walt and VISTA to the county is that it had become the nation's poster child for poverty. In 1960, McDowell County was the nation's top coal-producing county and Welch called itself "The Heart of the Nation's Coal Bin," one humble slogan. But because of the mechanization of coal mining and the county becoming the nation's top recipient of federal food aid, it was also John Kennedy's education on rural poverty during his 1960 presidential campaign. On May 29, 1961, McDowell County was the locale of the nation's first issuance of food stamps, $95 worth to the multigenerational Alderson and Chloe Muncy family of fifteen.

When United States Steel closed its local steel mill and coal mines supplying it laying off 1,200 people, the county went into unremitting freefall until today more than half of its children live below the poverty line, the state had to take over the flat-broke county school system and its decaying schools for twelve years, housing values dropped to near zero, a shadow economy of marijuana crops, drug trafficking, fraud, arson, white collar crime and embezzlement took

hold, domestic abuse, suicide, and OxyContin abuse soared, and the county population dwindled ever since. Once US Steel had extracted what it wanted from the county using local people to do it, the company abandoned them and went looking for its next place to scalp, and McDowell County became a sad laboratory case of societal disintegration. By the time of the 2010 census, McDowell County's median household income had dropped to $16,931, eighth lowest among the nation's 3,144 counties and county-equivalents.

Despite having the third lowest per capita income among the states, West Virginians are among the least mobile not only with a low proportion moving out of state but also internally with relatively fewer West Virginians moving from place to place within the state. Visiting the state one has to believe that one reason West Virginians are so much more prone to stay put is the sheer beauty of their state, the entirety of which rests in the Appalachian Range. Though there is extensive poverty along the mountainsides and in the hollers of West Virginia, those experiencing it live amidst cherished natural beauty that they prize. From the mountains and hollers that we have seen such as this evening's Number One Store Hollow, it is easy to see why a person living here, poor or not, would be hesitant to leave. The trade-off seems to be stunted economic opportunity in exchange for tranquil surroundings, low cost of living and that long-prized independent Scots-Irish way of life.