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Sidney Saylor Farr

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# MY APPALACHIA: A MEMOIR

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Sidney Saylor Farr

*This is an excerpt from Sidney Farr's recently published book, My Appalachia: A Memoir. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007. 231 pages with photos. Hardback with dust jacket. \$35.00.*

In southeastern Kentucky, we lived close to pioneer days even in the 1940s and 1950s. We lagged behind the times in Southern Appalachia, at least fifty to seventy-five years in some regions and a hundred years in others.

Almost everyone born in Southern Appalachia feels the relentless pull to return to the place of his or her birth. I believe that each of us is a link between the past and the future, and that it is up to us to pass along family history; otherwise the stories, songs, and traditions will be lost.

I am the oldest of ten children. My family lived as far back in the hollers as it was possible to go in Bell County, Kentucky. Dad worked in the timber woods and at a sawmill, when there was employment to be found. We ate what we grew on the place or could glean from the hillsides. Just about everything was made by hand. We had little contact with people outside the region

We shared with our neighbors and kin. When Dad planned to butcher a hog, he would send word to neighbors up and down the creek that they should come by the next day for a mess of meat. They did, and he would take meat to the older people, and there would be feasting everywhere as families cooked the fresh pork. When neighbors butchered their hogs, the same process was usually followed. These mountain people shared everything.

I grew up in the world of nature and sometimes felt those trees, rocks, and creeks were a very part of my blood, muscles, and bones. My heart has always been intimate with each season's bounty, and it has resisted any hint of a coming change. Sometimes I have felt that

I could not bear to see the promise of summer when red and white clover bloomed and green corn uncured, when butterflies came in clouds of color, and a misty rain washed the earth.

There is something mystical about warm rain, early morning dew, the cheeping cry of tree frogs and bellow of bullfrogs. There is something about the smell of wild honeysuckle floating on hot air so moist it sticks to our faces and hands. It is something that makes generation after generation of hill-bred parents, no matter where they live in the world in order to survive, make sure their children know “home” as they do.

In an unsettled world where families are often scattered north, east, south, and west, coming home gives them a needed sense of stability and family unity.

As I look back over my life, I am impressed with how many memories I have of foods we gathered, prepared, cooked and ate. I remember certain foods that everybody loved, like fried chicken and green beans accompanied by a pan of cornbread or biscuits. For holiday dinners and other special meals, mountain women cooked whatever they had on hand.

Perhaps it is merely memories of early childhood, warm kitchens, and scrumptious food that has made my kitchen the most popular place in my house today. Friends come to visit, and inevitably I find that we end up settling down to talk within the confines of the kitchen.

We worked sometimes from early morning until it got too dark to see outside. We also played hard. Three meals a day were never enough for us, and we looked for snacks in the afternoons and at night before bedtime. Breakfast was before daylight, dinner in the middle of the day, and supper in the early evening.

We had walnuts, hickory nuts, beechnuts, and hazelnuts to snack on during the winter. Dad often gathered hickory nuts while he was out squirrel hunting (squirrels were found most easily where hickory trees grew in the hills). There were times when he would come home with his hunting pouch full of hickory nuts instead of wild game. Walnut, hazelnut, and beechnut trees grew close to our cabin and alongside fences and roads. The children eagerly gathered the nuts.

I remember the golden days in October when we used to take coffee sacks (burlap) and head up the smaller ridges and coves to gather walnuts. The ground would be covered with leaves as rich in color as an Oriental rug. When we reached a walnut tree, we would rake back the leaves with our hands and feet and find green-hulled nuts covering the ground.

We stored walnuts and hickory nuts in the loft of our house or in the hayloft of the barn. The smaller nuts we stored in jars and cans in the kitchen.

A favorite snack of mine was black walnut kernels and cornbread. We kept a sack of walnuts near the wood box in the corner, and a hammer by the hearth. We cracked a bowlful of kernels, sprinkled them with salt, and ate them with a piece of cornbread.

I value the knowledge and survival skills that were handed down from the pioneers to my ancestors. These skills, and the knowledge and wisdom that accompanied them, providing that very special warm kitchen, are all part of Appalachia.