



PROJECT MUSE®

Sometimes Life, Like Love, is Hotter than a Pepper Sprout

Billy Edd Wheeler

Appalachian Heritage, Volume 36, Number 1, Winter 2008, pp. 9-16 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.2008.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/237282>

SOMETIMES LIFE, LIKE LOVE, IS HOTTER THAN A PEPPER SPROUT

Billy Edd Wheeler

I've never felt old enough to write a book of memoirs—until now, that is, since I'll be 75 by the time this issue is mailed. And what would I call it? I considered: Out of Appalachia...and Back, but thought it and a dozen other titles didn't sound enticing enough. Then Russ Cheatham, a writer friend, suggested Hotter Than a Pepper Sprout, a line from my song, "Jackson," as recorded by Johnny Cash and June Carter.

I argued that it sounded crass and commercial, not to mention egotistical. But Russ said, "It's also catchy—one of the most recognizable lines in country music. It won a Grammy for Cash and Carter and, hey boss, it will give you a springboard into your songwriting career."

For now, since I can't think of anything better, I'll use it as a working title. I've written chapters on how I went from picking coal in West Virginia to picking my brain in an office on Broadway, dropping a lot of names, but George Brosi and his staff of Berea College students chose the following segments from my Appalachian beginnings. There are no pepper sprouts here, but I bow to their wisdom and authority. Every writer needs a good editor.

INVITATION TO A FUNERAL

My biological father died in 1986 at the age of seventy-eight. Johnny Protan, former sheriff of Boone County, West Virginia, called to invite me to the funeral. He used to coach the boxers who worked for Anchor Coal Company at Highcoal, having been a nationally-ranked welterweight himself. He wanted me to box too, so I trained for a month with the miners upstairs at the poolroom. Then one day, Johnny asked me to go three rounds with a slender Black boy named Dexter Johnson, who looked to me like a pushover. After two rounds, my nose was bleeding so bad Johnny stopped us. He said, "Don't

worry, now. After your nose gets broke a few times it'll toughen up and stop bleeding." I said I thought I'd stick to baseball.

I told Johnny I didn't think I'd come to the funeral—I hardly knew Dutch Perdew.

"Your sister'll be there," Johnny said.

"My sister? I didn't know I had one."

"Well, your half-sister. Her name's Jewel, and she lives in Ohio."

"Where in Ohio?" I asked.

"Why, right downtown," Johnny laughed to let me know he was kidding. "Anyhow, everybody wants you to come."

I told him, all right, I'd be there. So I drove to Whitesville, West Virginia, the place where I was born, just five miles from Highcoal, and attended the funeral on January 2, 1986. I met my half-sister Jewel at the Armstrong Funeral Home, and her mother, Dutch's wife, Vernie Chingle Perdew. I had a guilty conscience because everybody was looking real weepy but me. I didn't know quite how to act. So I frowned and blew my nose every now and then, and it seemed to pass for a show of emotion.

The Reverend Vernon Price preached one of those generic, ho-hum, one-size-fits-all sermons without saying anything personal about Dutch. The closest he came was when he listed Dutch's survivors—daughter Jewel, wife Vernie, a sister Agnes Farley, six grandchildren and twelve great-grandchildren.

Following the service as people filed by the casket for one last look at Dutch, I stepped out of line and waited to speak to the preacher, who seemed to be dozing as he stood to the side, nodding benevolently at the line of mourners.

"Mr. Price," I said extending my hand, "I wanted to meet you and say I was disappointed when you read the list of survivors without mentioning me. I'm Billy Edd Wheeler, Dutch Perdew's bastard son."

The preacher almost choked, swallowing and muttering "Er-ahs," at a total loss for words. I didn't mean to be malicious. I just wanted to wake him up and let him know his research was "just a little above below average," as my friend Chet Atkins was fond of saying about my guitar playing.

I stood for a while in front of Dutch's casket remembering the first time I'd met him—in Charleston, when I was seventeen. Uncle Vincent

was looking for a part for his old '38 Ford and had taken me along for the ride. He had heard by the grapevine that Dutch was in town to make funeral arrangements for his own father who had been hit by a car but didn't know where to start looking. As soon as we turned off of Kanawha Boulevard, though, he spotted Dutch walking along the sidewalk.

I told Vincent I'd just as soon meet my father some other time, rather than surprising him like this. I was getting nervous, afraid he might hug me. How was I supposed to respond? I hated sticky situations where people hugged and kissed and expected you to be as emotional as they were. But Vincent insisted, saying, "He's dying to meet you, I know he is. Come on."

Vincent grabbed my forearm and we hurried to catch up. He yelled, "Hey, Dutch, looky who I've got here." He raised my arm as if offering me up as a trophy. Thankfully, my father held out his hand, and we shook. Vincent asked about Dutch's father, and for ten minutes we heard all about the accident. When Dutch finally looked at me, he said he had wanted to come and see me when he brought timbers to Highcoal for use in the mines, but he didn't think my stepfather would like it. He didn't want to cause any trouble.

At a loss for anything else to say, he turned back to Vincent and they talked about car parts and Dutch's coal truck. Without seeming to, I studied Dutch's face but found no resemblance to mine. My nose is curved and pug-like. His was straight, bulbous and porous, and very red.

The meeting was brief and awkward, and my father's parting words to me were, "Son, don't drink."

After the funeral, I had a chance to talk with my half sister Jewel, and again I felt awkward. We were blood kin but had nothing in common except Dutch, a man I knew as little about as I did her. We went through the motions of promising to write, exchanging addresses as she puffed away on cigarettes and cursed the deep snow on the hills she'd had to spin up and slide down to get to Whitesville.

We did write each other a few times, but after a while, when I forgot to answer hers or she mine, our almost budding friendship died a natural death. As our father had. In our case, though, nobody came to the funeral.

Amen.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

*Traveling down that coal town road, listen to my rubber tires whine
Goodbye to buckeye and white sycamore, I'm leaving you behind
I been a coal man all of my life, layin' down track in the hole
Got a back like an ironwood bent by the wind, blood veins blue as the
coal
Blood veins blue as the coal.*

—Lyrics from “Coal Tattoo” by Billy Edd Wheeler

On August 24, 2007, four months before turning seventy-five, I drove back to Boone County, West Virginia, where I was born, and turned off of Big Coal River at Seng Creek and headed up the hollow toward Highcoal where I was raised from age five to sixteen.

It is only four miles from the river, but after two miles the road began to narrow and show potholes and large cracks. “Is Highcoal still up there?” I asked a small boy standing on a porch only ten feet from the road.

“Highcoal?” He looked to another boy about his age. They both shrugged. I drove on. Another mile and the road was crumbly, with brush on either side crowding in. In a clearing just ahead, I saw a small wood-frame house standing near a church I recognized. It was the church once used by the Black community at the lower end of Highcoal. There was nothing after that except tall weeds and taller, wilder bushes. Kudzu-covered trees looked like ghostly green sculptures. Not another landmark to offer bearings. I drove on slowly, steering my car left and right over old pieces of what was once an asphalt road, mostly dirt now.

It is a strange, surreal feeling to go back to where you grew up and see nothing there. Not a house or corrugated tin garage, no church or company store, no poolroom where men drank beer and gambled in the back—where kids could buy candy and pop, or see black-and-white movies upstairs, or boxing matches, or go to Sunday School. The poolroom was an all-purpose amusement center, always busy with activity. No sign now of where it once stood. Not a scrap of cinderblock or tarpaper.

I drove on following the creek, determined to reach the end of the road at the head of the hollow. From there I hoped to find a path that would lead up to a railroad bed where tracks once entered the mile-long tunnel that ran from Highcoal, in Boone County, over to Kayford, in Kanawha County. I wanted to see the tunnel entrance and take a picture, although the lady at the cvs store in Whitesville told me it was now sealed up with boulders and cement. The tracks had been removed long ago.

That tunnel has a special place in my memory.

When I was thirteen, my stepfather slapped me around for not finishing washing the dishes after supper. I had done the dishes, but the greasy pots and pans grossed me out. Sister said she would do them for me, but Arthur Stewart would have none of that. I was to finish the job myself. I balked, and he hit me. I was stunned. I had seen him slap my mother around while I cried and watched, helpless, but he had never struck me.

“You shit-ass!” I blurted out, staring him straight in the face, trying unsuccessfully to keep from crying. I had never cursed an adult in my life. He slapped me a few more times, yanking me around by the arm, until I picked up the dishrag and went back to the sink. I hated myself for crying. Boys my age in Highcoal would have laughed at me for crying. Big boys, tough boys, didn’t cry. Nor did they wash dishes. That was girls’ work. Boys carried coal in and water from the pump; they chopped wood, delivered groceries from the company store. They never washed dishes.

That night, I made my mind up to run away from home.

Next morning, early, I left the house with my school lunch in hand—in a brown paper bag we called a “poke”—and headed down toward the poolroom as if to catch the school bus. Across from Mrs. Carter’s house, I climbed a faint path through the weeds up to the railroad tracks and turned back toward the tunnel. I broke off a small limb from a sycamore sapling and used it to rub along the rails in the dark. It was cool in the tunnel, and the crossties were slippery from dripping water, making walking difficult. After I had rounded the first curve, I could see the end of the tunnel, about a mile away. It looked like the eye of a needle. Twenty minutes later, the eye had become the size of a ping pong ball, but suddenly it went dark, and I heard

an unmistakable noise. A cold hand squeezed my heart and made me shiver.

A train was coming.

To say I was scared is the mother of understatements. Without a light I couldn't run back, and walking fast on the slippery ties was too unpredictable with only a stick for a guide. I had to make a decision—stand with my back to the wall of the tunnel or lie down in the ditch partly filled with water. Standing was preferable, I thought, but if it was a C&O coal train coming at me, there might be metal rods or something sticking out. My imagination told me my belly could be sliced open. Or I could be yanked up and dragged along with the train, or sucked under the steel wheels and flattened along the rails.

The noise got louder and louder. The rails set up a sort of humming, vibrating enough to make the crosstie I was standing on move slightly. I figured I had maybe a minute left, but the debate was over. I laid down in the ditch next to the tunnel wall, resting my head on one forearm with the other across my head, my elbow partly covering my face, my hand holding the lunch poke away from the water. The rails were now about a foot and a half above my head, resting on ties laid across a bed of heavy tangerine-sized gravel that sloped down to where I lay.

As the train thundered noisily over me, the crossties jolted up and down spastically, knocking chunks of gravel loose that sometimes hit my elbow or my side. Even with my eyes closed, I could see sparks shooting from the rails. I smelled coal smoke, thick and acrid all around me, hot in my nostrils. My eyes burned. After the train was gone, I rolled up onto the gravel but stayed down for several minutes, hoping the smoke would clear or rise to the top of the tunnel, allowing me to get up and walk without having to breathe much of it.

When I stood up, the sandwich and apple rolled out of my poke, along with the chunk of railroad gravel that had shot into it, causing it to tear. I heard the apple bounce and then plunk into water, but the sandwich wrapped in waxed paper landed safely on a crosstie. It was my favorite—baloney fried black, with a lot of mustard and thick slices of onion. I picked it up and stuffed it into a front pocket, felt around in the water until I found the apple, and put it in my other pocket, the one containing twenty five cents. I would eat a good lunch later. First, I had a half mile left of smokey tunnel to negotiate, and I prayed that when I

walked or caught a ride down to Eskdale, Granddaddy Wheeler would let me stay and batch it with him.

That was then, and now, sixty years later, I wanted to find that tunnel and get my picture.

A young bear sat in the middle of an open area where the road ended, as if waiting there to greet me. He/she just looked at me. I snapped pictures through the windshield until I was within twenty feet, at which point she got up, ambled toward the creek and disappeared into the tall weeds.

I stood looking in all directions, knowing I had to be only fifty yards or so above the location of the old Cantley house, located three houses up from where we used to live. A barrier made of metal pipes was swung across the road just beyond where the bear had stood, but it seemed totally unnecessary. The road had shrunk to a seldom-used path overgrown with weeds, like everything else in Highcoal. I must have stood for five minutes looking around, searching for signs of a past life when my reverie was ended abruptly.

A shot rang out that had to be a high-powered rifle. It sounded close. An echo-like reverberation bounced around in the treetops. Then silence. No sound except the low gurgle of the creek. I listened for a shout, a deer or bear breaking through the brush, but . . . nothing. Was there a poacher out for the young bear's mom or dad, or the bear herself? A moonshiner letting me know it was time to leave? Or was somebody just taking target practice up on the old railroad bed? More importantly, did I want to walk on up to the tunnel? I thought I did, but I decided to wait a few minutes.

I was not scared, but I was concerned. Finally, thinking it silly to entertain any notion that whoever had the rifle would actually shoot me, a fellow West Virginian, I decided to walk up to the tunnel.

As if the rifleman was reading my mind, another shot rang out. The blast seemed to say, "Bad decision, buddy. Time to tuck your tail and skedaddle." I agreed. The place was giving me an eerie feeling. Imagine, being near my old home place and having thoughts of *Deliverance*! At least Jon Voight had a bow and arrow.

Back in the car, I saw the bear about fifty feet in front of me as I drove down the road. She seemed unconcerned about the rifle shots, crossing from the creek on the right to the weeds on the left. When

I got to the spot where she had crossed I put my window down and caught one last glimpse of her as she slipped like a dark phantom into the darker shadows of the mountain.

“I’ll be back, young lady,” I whispered out the window.

But I wasn’t sure of that. Most likely my next trip to Highcoal would be years ago, coming back when I was five in a future chapter of this remembrance.

*Somebody said that’s a strange tattoo you have on the side of your head
I said it’s the blueprint left by the coal, a little more and I’d be dead
But I love the rumble and I love the dark, I love the cool of the slate
But it’s on down this new road looking for a job, this travelin’ and
looking I hate
This travelin’ and looking I hate.*

—Lyrics from “Coal Tattoo” by Billy Edd Wheeler