

An Odd Place for Bones

There's a picture on my wall of a place that used to be, and still is, but not to our eyes anymore. Butler. Established at the founding of the country, when Tennessee wasn't even a state. Carved out of the wilderness- the last stop before what used to be the western frontier- that was my town. Was so for seven generations. Was so until a man with a plan from the TVA came through here and pointed up the ridge.

“That's where we'll put New Butler, right up there.”

This wasn't the frontier anymore. Electricity was coming. Telephone. The modern age. We had all that, but they wanted more- the TVA folks. They came here talking about flooding our home, building a dam and a New Butler like we didn't have a say about it.

“You don't want to stand in the way of progress?” The man asked at the Town meeting, headed by the preacher whose name I can't recall. I won't recall, because he was in on it. This man we trusted with our souls, sold them out to the TVA, and bought for himself a plot of land he thought he'd name after himself where we'd all live. But once the TVA made the deal, they took old Butler, and the old man's name, and renamed the plot of land he bought “New Butler.”

“We'll take care of each one of you.” The man said, “We'll move all your homes for you. All for free. Won't cost you a thing.”

He was right. It didn't cost us anything- except our community. Home by home, they went rolling up the ridge, out of Butler. Billy Milhorn lived near the center of town. It took a week to move his home. Each day, he came from school looking for his house up and down the roads. It was a fun scavenger hunt until the last day, when his home made it to the edge of town. By Monday, he waved goodbye to us for the last time, as the house made it out of the valley.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about. You’ll have your houses.” The TVA man told us.

We had our houses, but the community- what about that? Our history- what about that? Our family, going back two hundred years, what about that? My father, who I buried in the family plot with his father and his father and his, beside the ancient Oak that still stood guard? What about that? It was bad enough when I had to lay him in the ground, and now you want to put a lake on top of him too, cover him over with the dam?

“We’d never do that. I’ve got an answer for that.”

He did. They dug my daddy up. Dug up all 1,851 souls buried with markers. But what about the old, old Butler residents? The ones buried under wooden crosses long ago gone? The ones now under a layer of muck and mud and Lake Watauga?

Old Butler wasn’t just homes. It was a community. Houses got moved, but not all to the same place. Not all in the same location. Some went to Elizabethton, Some to Telford. Newport. Greeneville. You can always tell a Butler home when you drive by it, wherever it sits. Billy’s house got moved to New Butler. Quite a few other’s too. My granddaddy’s barber shop never made it there. It ended up on a street corner on 11-E in Johnson City. He still had his business, but it wasn’t the same. They were customers now, not family. Not community.

For the good of the state, we stood on top of the ridge, looking down, when the TVA released the water. Electricity for Appalachia, that’s what they said it’s for. No longer would the fertile soil grow wheat and tobacco and tomatoes. No more would the whippoorwill sing in the woods. At least they got away. The squirrels and rabbits and bobcats and deer, they had no warning like they get when Mother Earth makes her own transformations. No rumble in the ground, save for the engines of the house movers. No soft winds to whisper the coming change.

No scent of rain before a storm to warn the creatures great and small to seek higher ground.

Washed away were their homes too, but they never got a chance to save their young and run.

Everyone from the TVA cheered as the flood waters rushed down and swept away the little reminders we'd left behind, for some diver in a far-off future to discover.

“Who’s wedding ring is this?” “Who’s toy train?” “Who’s shaving cup?”

They’d ask, swimming through the still standing oak trees, their branches full, not of leaves, but draped with lake grass. The trees are there still, underwater sentries, standing guard over a town lost to time, but not lost to memory. Not our memory.

The TVA cheered again as the lake began to grow and the dam held up. We stood silent like the stone angels once marking the family plots that were now strewn across the empty, open field just in the distance of where I stood. I used to know where my father was, resting under the shade of the magnificent oak, whose long limbs stretched further out through time to shelter each new generation.

I had to look away from the barren field that held my father’s bones, and fixed my eyes back on the deluge. I caught sight of a fawn fighting furiously against the rush. Her tender limbs, too small to paddle against the unnatural rushing tide, began to kick less and less. She was only yards from the shore line, and seeing this she began another attempt to swim her way to edge, but as the water kept rising, the shore grew more and more distant. I held my breath for her, willing her to make it out of the torrent. My mother took my hand, her fingernails clutching at my wrist as she bore witness, too, and together we clung to each other and hoped that the little girl would make it home. The TVA cheered one last time as the water reached its intended level. My mother and I released our breath, as the lifeless little form was carried toward the banks, and bumped against a fallen tree along the edge before finally slipping under.

Men in hard hats congratulated each other as they left in their automobiles, while we walked a short distance toward New Butler. As we reached the limits of town, I felt my mother's fingernails again, as she pulled us away. We began our long walk through Cherokee Forest, heading toward Mountain City, where her sister-in-law had moved.

"I can't do it, Joyce. I can't pretend it's someplace it isn't."

We never would live in New Butler. It had some of the houses, but it didn't have the same feeling. We could feel in our bones when we were home before, but there was nothing drawing us back to this new place that had nothing else of our home but the name. Since 1768, we were a community. And then, we weren't. Not on the land. But how do you keep a community of heart alive and growing without the old way of life? Without the land?

We slept rough under the trees with that thought in our heads. I'd slept rough many a time with my family while out hunting for meat, to tide us over for the winter. A good size buck would fill the smoke house and provide for us all season, but we rarely found one on the first few nights. We'd usually have provisions with us on the outing, but we also knew where to go for Jerusalem artichokes and chestnuts and wild muscadine. We also knew the location of an ancient apple orchard started right after the Revolutionary War by some Overmountain Men from Sycamore Shoals. But in this new wild, we didn't find ourselves anything but cold. We're from hardy stock, though. We didn't worry about spending a night in the rough without food.

My aunt Lorena took us in when we arrived a bit shivery at her doorstep. She stoked up the woodstove and baked us some cathead biscuits and gravy. My mom drank chicory and talked of the water and wondered how electricity could ever burn as evenly as this woodstove that served three generations. My aunt said she'd rather like to push a button for heat instead of chopping wood each day, and we sat silently at the idea as the space between us grew colder.

Busby Taggert, the Blacksmith from Old Butler who had not yet found a new job, along with Gerald Laws, the furniture and casket maker, were called for. Before we knew it, they were adding a lean-to room onto the house for mom. They got the idea to start building for me until I stopped them. I'd stay to get mom settled in, but I wasn't sure where I was going to land.

Several of my old classmates from Watauga Academy paid us visits over the next week. Some were transplanting themselves pretty well here in Mountain City. Some were dandelions like me, floating around for a while to see where they might take root. Before the last one of us left, we decided to hold a reunion each year. Everyone from Old Butler would get together in New Butler. To remember.

We laid the whole thing out, there in the kitchen around the table, sipping R.C. Cola and sharing a sandwich together like we used to do at the Blue Bird Tea Room, packed in like a lunchtime rush. Of course, none of us was in a hurry anymore, being out of or in between work as we rebuilt our lives. But there was an urgency to the idea.

“We'll do a role call for the class members of Watauga Academy!” Gerald shouted and jumped up singing our Alma Mater. We all joined him.

I think we were all a little surprised the next year in 1949, when every single one of us showed up by the Dry Hill General Store next to the New Butler Baptist Church. All of Old Butler.

“New Butler is great living!”

I looked over, and saw Shirley Meade still making eyes at Billy like she did all through grade school, and gushing about how great her new life was.

“I run Nancy's Beauty Parlor now. They moved the building, but now the place has me all over it. Electricity and all.”

“We had electricity, Shirley. The other parts around here didn’t.”

“I know that, silly. I’m talking, all electric, though. Not just the lights. Hair appliances and even electric dryers so I can set and style. And I have more customers than I know what to do with!”

Busby caught my look, and for a moment I was sure he read my mind. My home couldn’t have been flooded just to give Shirley Meade an electric hair dryer, but for all her crowing, you’d think so. Busby broke my thoughts before they could lead me further.

“Let’s all head to the chapel. We’ll do a roll call, and Herman is going to do a service.”

There was only one from Old Butler not there, and it was man that none of us would recall. Herman Tester, in the past year, had heard the call to preach and tried really hard to be thankful to be together in New Butler on that day.

Every one of us who had been to Watauga Academy, from its earliest days through last year, found our way back to that first reunion, including Carlisle Springmore, who at 96 was the last living graduate who went there from the school’s founding in 1871. His first and last reunion.

We never had to worry about a reunion before this, because we had always been together. We rang a bell for Carlisle the next year. He’d passed away a month before the second reunion, and was buried in the empty field next to his wife, thirty-two-and-a-quarter-miles from where she was first laid, and so far from where he intended his final journey to take him. It was eighty-four degrees when he was buried. An Indian Summer. No shade except the moving shadows of the four turkey vultures circling throughout the service.

“I’ll take care of you!” Gerald shouted up, as everyone started to leave. He didn’t join the rest of us at “The Cove” restaurant that night, overlooking Lake Watauga, under which sat our

old community. This would become a post-reunion custom. But that night, Gerald went out to Cherokee Forest and brought back two Chestnuts, planting them far enough away to grow strong on their own, and near enough to help each one bear fruit. He did it for Carlisle. He did it for all of us. There needed to be more of our final home than an empty field of bones.

In 1957, we called out Gerald's name and rang a bell. He would be glad to know that volunteer saplings sprouted up here and there, as Cherokee slowly tried reclaiming herself in the old field.

In the 1960's, we began calling the names and ringing the bell more and more for those no longer with us. Last year, we rang more bells than those who answered "present." Young sentinels have arrived to stand guard over the old community. Tulip poplars, sycamores, chestnuts, along with honeysuckle vines creeping their way slowly around the edges. The rabbits have returned, and the whistle pigs, which have caused havoc to several graves, but it speaks more to life than death, so I try not to worry about all of the burrows.

This past reunion, I realized that I am among the last of us left with a living memory of Old Butler. Billy Milhorn was there. And Shirley, perfectly made up and still making eyes at Billy. After the service, he was leaving the church, really slowly, and turned back to wave goodbye, and I knew. It was the same look he had that last day before leaving Butler those years ago. He knew he wouldn't be back.

But I will. Maybe not like the Cherokee, slowly creeping back into the place from where she was cleared, bringing with her all the others who were banished- the sandpiper, the green heron, the killdeer and carpet bees. I won't lie under the blankets of asters and beardtongues that have gently covered my schoolmates over the decades. I'll return home, to Old Butler. Somehow. Water or not, my bones know where they belong.