

## A Trip to My Past

by

Tom Holbrook

6/10/06

Each week as I prepare to write this column I dutifully read, listen to and watch as many news outlets as I can just to stay on top of what's going on in the real world. As one might guess it begins to affect how one thinks, speaks and acts because of the trauma connected with each act of violence or the latest political scandal in Washington. Is nothing sacred anymore? If we allow it, melancholy settles in on us like a cloud and sometimes we just want to throw up our arms and yell, "Enough already!" My solution to the challenge... a trip to the past and the memories it holds.

While visiting Lewisburg over the last several weeks I felt it was time to dwell, at least temporarily, on the positive things of life and what made this country and our own little space within it so special. My brother Rudy and I were both born in Greenbrier County... Rudy in Renick and I in Middletown... (In case you don't know where that was... it was that street that separated Rainelle from East Rainelle back in the 40's,) but we moved to Belle when I was three and Rudy was five. Dad left his job at Meadow River Lumber and went to work at the Dupont Chemical Plant in Belle. Even though we physically changed our address our hearts and minds remained in Greenbrier County. Every long change weekend Dad would get would result in us on our way to Punkin' Center, which is what the village of Auto was called by most Greenbrier Countians at that time. Also, as soon as our school took its summer break, Mom and Dad would make the trip over Gauley and Sewell mountains and deposit Rudy and I with one of our many cousins in the Holbrook, Gabbert, and/or Renick families. Mom and Dad would then go back to Belle and Rudy and I would be rotated between every family for a period of time, determined by our behavior and how we were wearing on the nerves of our aunts and uncles.

I wouldn't swear that our presence there was a tryin' time for them, but they sure smiled a lot bigger when they saw us agoin' than they did when they saw us acomin'. My cousins jokingly called us "city boys" and did their darndest to embarrass us or get us to show our lack of knowledge about the ways of the country... which didn't take much thinking on their part... especially where I was concerned. Being the sensitive young lad that I was all they had to do was point out a slithering snake on the ground or put a couple of large grasshoppers in my hair... okay, so I was a wimp... and Rudy, of course, joined in the fun. He also enjoyed Biology more than I did.

As Judy and I now drove throughout Greenbrier County my thoughts were manipulated by the old barns, many now leaning under the weight of decades of passing storms, still proudly proclaiming their message to "Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco," and as we would turn off the main

highway to meander around the back country like mice in a giant maze, I remembered my astonishment at how Dad could find his way without any direction signs at all. Somehow we always found our way to Grandma's house, however. Even in the most previously uninhabited regions of the area we now had to call upon our memory bank to be able to ignore the sprawl of newly built houses and allow our mind's eye to revive the image of those great stands of oak trees and chinquapin patches, or those huge fields once dotted with majestic stacks of hay held together with a stackpole... taller than the highest tree in any forest... or so it seemed to my pre-teen eyes.

I'll never forget the first time they allowed me to help build a stack by stamping the hay on top of the stack that they would pass up to me... starting low and growing so high above the ground I would not even think about how I was going to get down when we finished. Using the longest of pitchforks they would take the hay off the drag, or wagon, and I would spread it around and stamp it down as tightly as my skinny frame would allow. It was hot work but a dipper of cool well water was only a pitchfork away when needed.

I had watched the other guys get down from the top many times and I knew my turn was coming when this stack was completed, but I kept pushing the thought to the back of my mind. All too soon my time of reckoning came and they stuck that extra long pitchfork up for me and said, "Okay, Tommy, grab hold of the pole and just slide over the side. Don't worry, we'll catch you." I hesitated for only a moment... too many eyes on me to turn back now... ever so carefully I'd sit down and inch my way toward that scary precipice to nowhere... unable to see those at the bottom and only the handle of a pitch fork peeking its head up way over there out of my reach. I stretched my foot out so I could just touch the handle ever so slightly, giving me a slight feeling of security... then, inching, inching closer to the edge... when suddenly I was under the control of gravity and down I'd come landing safely in my uncle's arms, since he was the tallest of the bunch. For a nine year old "city boy" it was like a rite of passage for me and I hoped I would be thought of as more than just another scared little kid from that point on.

Wonderful memories all, and there are so many more memories poking their way out of my head but space won't allow me to share them at this time. I hope you will forgive me if I bring them out from time to time in future articles as a needed break from the shoot 'em up, bang-bang rhetoric that has occupied so much of our news in the past. Have a great day and why don't you use this time to exercise your memories a little... it's a great trip and costs practically nothing.

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