

Neighborliness: Keep the home fires burning bright



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Roaming back to read John Parris' "Roaming the Mountains" once again, his first essay caught my attention, as it did the first time I read it. Titled "The Good Old Days," Parris relates the words of a grandfather in Sylva telling his grandson what it was like back in the mists of his memory. As they sit by the fire, the tales warm the cold night with images of old.

The elderly storyteller weaves the past like wisps of smoke from his pipe. The mountain folk needed a rifle and an axe to make a life in the backcountry. After building their own cabins, they carved their own tables, chairs, beds; spun their own clothes; crafted their own candles; hammered their own farm implements. They made cider and molasses, grew their food crops, ground their corn into meal. Self-sufficiency was just the way you lived, survived and thrived.

Yet, in the wisdom Pawpaw passes along to his grandson, this self-reliance didn't mean there was no sense of rela-

tion, of community connection. Neighborliness was a part of the people as the people were a part of the land. "Why, everybody helped everybody else. They helped each other raise their houses, build their barns, string their beans, shuck their corn." Women worked as hard as the men, making quilts, canning, planting, hoeing and plowing.

His story ends with: "Those were the good days, and a-body lived right well, too."

More than a salt of the earth man, this old-timer was sowing a field for the next generation to harvest—seeds for succeeding offspring. This is the way it's probably always been done, since the beginning of time, if time can have a beginning. Stories and traditions passed down the endless line, memories kindled in the fires of the imagination.

One particular part of the aged man's story tugged on my sleeve. This is one image I want to think about long by my own fire – of home and mind.

"Matches were scarce and costly. Everybody had a firebox to fetch coals from a neighbor's when his fire went out."

There's a picture to hang on our mental wall. Your fire dies, so you pick up your firebox and walk—how many miles?—to your neighbor's house. You knock. They see your box and immediately invite you in. You may sit and

shoot the breeze for a spell, sip some of the homemade cider or moonshine. Then your neighbor, mountain kinfolk, carefully shovels several glowing coals from the log fire onto the creek-stones in your hickory box. You hand them a jar of preserves as they send you off into the evening, carrying your precious coals.

Here is one of those profoundly human acts that seems almost like a parable (Greek for something "thrown down beside"). A life lesson tossed beside us like kindling, causing us to wonder what we can learn from the "firebox" story.

Maybe, as they say, it is what it is. A simple act, repeated again and again, neighbor by neighbor, holler after holler. What of now? Do we still have fireboxes and how are the coals passed along now? Or have the "home fires" really died out along with basic neighborliness?

What fires should we carry forth from the "old folks" – parents, grandparents, neighbors, friends, traditions, religions? What if the "coals" they hand us come with elements we don't want to bring home – like bigotry, prejudice, plain and simple ignorance? Maybe the fire itself, the spark of life, the warmth of community, companionship or culture is worth the bearing though it comes with some things we no longer need or

want or can bear any longer.

We might think of it this way. Someone comes to us for a cup of sugar or a cup of kindness. Another shows up at the doorstep and begs compassion. Or, to throw down a twist to the parable, we are the one asking, begging, standing with open hands, open mind, open firebox.

I'll leave it to the reader to carry this story where you will. When the great teachers of history told stories, in mountains or meadows, they intended to pass along something that was meant to be passed on and on.

You've probably seen them. Rising out of the forest here and there. Old chimneys. Last vestiges of homesteads. Each one a reminder of the cabins, the people and the flames that gave light and life to the mountain folk. Each stack of bricks drawing up a living image of stories and storytellers gathered around kindled logs, sharing tales that sustained them as much as the meals cooked over those flames.

Do we know where our firebox is? Do we have any coals to share?

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