

In the heart of North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains, lies a community called Roaring Creek. A Sense of Place: My Life and Times on Roaring Creek explores the author's connection to and reflections on this Southern Appalachian Highlands community.

**A Sense of Place:
My Life and Times on Roaring Creek**

By Chris R. Hughes

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A SENSE OF PLACE

My Life and Times on
Roaring Creek

A photograph of a rocky stream flowing through a dense forest. The water is clear and flows over numerous rocks of various sizes. The surrounding trees are lush and green, with some autumnal colors visible. The lighting is soft and natural, suggesting a forest setting.

CHRIS R. HUGHES

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Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-681-3

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-64719-682-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Hughes, Chris R.

A Sense of Place: My Life and Times on Roaring Creek by

Chris R. Hughes

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021912279

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2021

First Edition

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Chapter 1: There's No Home Like Place

Nearly fourteen Autumns ago, on a frigid, mid-November Saturday, I watched a solitary beech leaf gracefully pirouette to the forest floor. Waving goodbye to kinder, gentler seasons, her life-filled green had been surrendered in exchange for a brittle brown. It would be her final performance. She had fulfilled her purpose, and was now destined to join her millions of other companions—hickory, oak, maple, ash, buckeye, poplar, birch, locust, other beech. She would eventually become part of the cool black earth, where her original roots still stretched.

Winter came early to the valley that year. November was usually moderate. Normal for the eleventh month in the higher altitude Blue Ridge Mountains, meant heavy frosts, much cooler weather than that of early Fall, and maybe a flake or three of snow, but not that year. It was as if gruff, sullen Old Man Winter, with his long white beard and bushy brow crusted over with frost, his breath billowing in the cutting air, had bullied and elbowed his way into late Fall. He was unwilling to wait his turn for only six more weeks or so. The sharp air clawed at my face. The frozen ground crunched beneath my boots. Snow had already fallen, and more was waiting in the wing. Blue spirals of wood smoke, rising from the chimneys of mostly humble dwellings in the valley below, were whipped and tossed by the cold air.

Standing at around 4000 feet and facing East, I scanned the valley that lay below. Length-wise, it stretches about two miles to my left, and three to my right. At its widest, it's only about a mile or two between the steep eastern and western mountain slopes. Old, melodramatic gospel songs played on the stage of memory—*Here Today, And Gone Tomorrow; Gone Home; Precious Memories*; et al.

In that moment, in that place, it was impossible for me to absorb that scene apart from thoughts of my own mortality and the never-ending cycle of change. The majority of my people are now merely apparitions of memory, no doubt rising in the swirling smoke I saw below. Heraclitus (535 BCE – 475 BCE), one of the Greek sages of yore, surely got it right when he famously stated, “The only constant is change.”

At the time, daddy had been gone nearly three years, mommy was 80, and would pass less than five years later. My oldest sister, Pam, the Avery County High homecoming queen of 1971, died much too young in 1989. Baptist preacher, Great Grandpa ‘Field (Garfield), Grandpa Jack, Grandma Hazel, Grandpa Rob, Grandma Nell—gone. Uncle Michael, Veral, Coda, Grady, Autie, Lloyd, Verna, Earschel, Carm, Harriet, Clay, Opal, Homer—gone. Like a wispy fog desperately clinging to the treetops on some Blue Ridge Mountain peak, only to be swept away by the Northwest wind, all were gone. All had been borne away on the gossamer wings of death.

Scores of others from the Valley, too numerous to mention, have finished their courses since that Saturday afternoon, but the Valley remains. It was there before any of us were born, and it’ll be there after we are no more than names on a headstone, mere footnotes in time, *if* we are mentioned at all. Those haunting old blue ridges and narrow valleys were ancient when the great pyramids of the Nile Valley were still new, donning their blindingly brilliant coats of gleaming white limestone.

Place is powerful for those of us who have a sense of it. Some, through no fault of their own, don’t have that sense, simply because they *cannot*. Some come from military families, some have had numerous job transfers, personal crises, etc. *Place* to me is what a magnet is to iron. It’s almost an irrational pull, more akin to a spell of some sort. I can’t explain it. Too, I’m almost afraid that if I could explain it, the charm, the lure,

the magic would disappear like a soap bubble colliding with a thorn tree.

I've watched some of those incredible nature shows in utter astonishment. Certain birds, fish, and butterflies will migrate thousands of miles from the place of their origin, only to return to that exact spot, perpetuating the life cycle of their kind. They have no GPS, no compass, no map. They have only an innate *Sense of Place*.

To the ancient Israelites, as well as some of their contemporary descendants, it was as if a *Sense of Place* were programmed into their DNA. In large part, the religion of ancient Israel was by no means a purely spiritual or religious affair. Law, ritual, and culture, in and of themselves, always seemed to be weighed in the balances and found wanting, apart from *Place*. It was imprinted on the collective consciousness of the people.

No wonder the famous singers and musicians of ancient Judah, living in exile about a thousand miles from home in the 7th Century BCE, just couldn't find a melody, just couldn't muster the will, and just couldn't play a tune on their harps and lyres if they tried. Their captors begged them, taunting them perhaps, "We hear you Jews can really sing! Sing us one of your songs!" The Jews responded with, "How can we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?" And they didn't. They hung their harps on willow trees and wept (Psalm 137). I get that. Song apart from *Place* just wasn't the same. That only would have exacerbated the pain.

I'm not well-traveled, but within my limited experience, I have seen some beautiful country. I think that Stoney Creek, in Upper East Tennessee, is a picturesque kind of place, with dozens of veiny roads and hollers connecting to the main artery, but it's not *my* creek. The Great Smokeys, close to a hundred miles southwest of the Valley, are breathtaking, impressive,

intimidating, but they're not *my* mountains. Shady Valley and Siam Valley, also in Upper East Tennessee, and Shenandoah Valley in western Virginia are as pretty as any valleys I'd ever hope to see, but they're not *mine*. Holston Mountain, just a stone's throw from my current dwelling, is heartbreakingly beautiful, caressing the sky with its long elegant ridgeline, but it's not *my* mountain.

I once had the privilege of looking up at Mount Hermon, at the northernmost extreme of Israel, straddling the border between Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. Over 9000 feet in elevation, the mountain's summit was still partially covered with snow in early June. That area reminded me slightly of the Roan Highlands. Spiritually and emotionally moving as it was to be there, the Roan Highlands it is not. All the aforementioned are magnificent, yet none has ever held me with such an umbilical connection as has my *Place*.

Almost entirely, my world is a forgotten one. During my college and seminary years, I remember hearing, with reference to the two primary languages of the Biblical text—Biblical Hebrew and Koine Greek—the term “dead languages.” It is very true that Biblical Hebrew and Koine Greek are indeed “dead” in terms of their no longer being spoken or written languages in modern times. But, as one of my professors astutely observed, they've *never* been dead to the world of scholarship. In that realm at least, they are very much alive and well.

My world, i.e., my original point of reference, is largely *dead* in terms of culture, lifestyle, and existential reality. For those of us, however, whose moorings are tied to *Place*, it will *never* be just another fossilized relic of a past epoch. Its ghosts will haunt our memories. Its melodies will always find a way to be heard. Its stories will always beg to be told to eager ears.

Thin as onion skin paper, and bubbly as soap suds, the twenty-something year old hostess at the NASA Space Center's *Meet the Astronauts* program, faced the daunting challenge of peppering up the wilted crowd gathered for the show. Being one of the "wiltees" in the oppressive Florida heat and humidity that August afternoon, in the mid-1980's, I know that there weren't many enthusiastic participants. I did have to give the bubbly girl an A+ for effort though.

"*Hooow* many of you have ever wanted to be an astronaut?" she yelled into the microphone, her high-pitched voice resonating with rising emphasis, penetrating what eardrums I still had left. As expected, that got a response. Hands flew up all over the tin covered pavilion, that had been transformed into an oven, beneath the Florida sun.

For a very good reason, Miss 20-Something-Peppy-What's-Her-Name didn't see my hand raised. Not only was I not in the mood to participate in a pep rally, but I was also just being honest. I didn't raise my hand for one simple reason: *never*, not even *once* that I recall, have I *ever* had any inkling of a desire to be an astronaut. "Not even as a little boy?" you wonder. Nope. Nor did the thought cross my mind as a big boy either. Not even during that period of temporary insanity known as adolescence did I experience a hormonal impulse to be an astronaut. When I was five, I did aspire to the U.S. presidency, but had no aspirations of exploring the final frontier.

My reasons? Well, there are several, not least of which is the fact that something as innocuous as riding in the back seat of a car, used to have the potential to induce me toward projectile vomiting. I don't even want to think about the gastronomical effects of traveling at several thousand miles per hour at zero gravity. Nor would I want to endure the torturous training that astronauts have to complete.

The main reason I've never wanted to be an astronaut is because I've always had a gnawing fear that the spacecraft might not make it back. On the highway, it's one thing to run out of gas, or have a flat tire, or a broken transmission, but imagine having a breakdown on Mars. Or you're out only God knows where, on the intergalactic interstate at mile marker 6 quintillion. Who are you going to call? I'm pretty sure that AAA doesn't do service calls that far out. What if it's a problem Houston can't fix? Worse yet, what if something really got fouled up and you got lost in the coldness of space?

I'm very much aware that both public and private space programs are in the hands of people with big brains, super computers, and are supported with mega bucks. I know, it's all computerized, mechanized, and preprogrammed. It's not *likely* that there'd be a breakdown on the intergalactic super highway. Nor is it probable that something would so irreparably malfunction so as to miscalculate the path of travel, thus rendering the craft as MIA. But what if something *did* happen? I'll never take that chance. I just want to be able to walk back home if need be. I feel like my cousin Eric who said, "I don't want to go anywhere that I can't walk back home if I need to!" I've decided to subscribe to that way of thinking. After doing three of them, I don't even want to do another cruise.

In her formative years, my daughter Amber, along with my wife, Tonia, would sometimes accompany me to my folks' place on Roaring Creek. Since, thanks be to God, I have never truly "grown up," Amber and I would play for hours in the great outdoors. Whether swinging from the tire swing that hung from the big willow tree, riding our sleds in the deep winter snow, or just turning over rocks and finding crayfish and salamanders, we had a blast—just a little girl, and a big boy who happened to be her father. One day, with the spontaneous excitement that only a child could express, Amber exclaimed, "Dad! This place

is better than Disney!” She had been to lots more theme parks than I, and thus had something with which to compare it. All along, I just assumed the truth of what she said.

Maybe you grew up in a similar world as mine, or perhaps mine is a world of which you’ve only heard. Trust me, it does exist. For better, for worse, for good, for ill—and it can be any of those separately or simultaneously—Roaring Creek Valley is where my roots run deep in the pitch-black dirt, sustained by the ice-cold spring waters. Welcome to *my* world. Walk the ridges, fields, and hollows with me. Throw some rocks in the roiling creek, drink your fill from its chilly springs, gaze deeply at its stunning natural beauty, listen closely to its melodies.

Surely, all honest, thinking people have regrets, but to have had the privilege of growing up where and when I did is something that I consider to be one of my greatest, choicest privileges in life. It is something that I will never, ever regret. There’s much more of this world I’d like to see and experience, but if and when I do so, I *know* that I will ever and always be tethered to my *Sense of Place*.

A Sense of Place

(May 1998)

Where are you from? Where grow your roots?

Neither here, nor there, neither hither nor yon?

Like Zephyr, have you neither track nor trace?

Not so I, for I have a sense of place.

Place is a valley, fairest daughter of Grassy Ridge and
Yellow Bald.

Cruel and kind, distant and near, a strange lover is she.

She wrings my heart with scorn and grace;

But I love her still, for she is my sense of place.

Place is the gallery where the memories hang;

The chief volume that tells my tale;

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The canvas that captures my face.
Oh! the images that cling to this sense of place!
Farewell forever, fair fields, cold waters, mystic heights!
She beckons and calls like some old forlorn tune;
Pointing toward the hillside where sleeps my kindred race.
Lay me there to rest, I pray, in the bosom of my
sense of place.

Chapter 2: Valley, North Carolina

Place, *my place*, is a rather insignificant-looking dot on a North Carolina map. For the uninitiated, I often have to start with Asheville, Boone, or even Charlotte to help them locate it. When trying to explain where I'm from, the response is usually, and I will add *understandably*, a flat-line brain wave indicator. "Avery County?" I'll ask, "do you know where that is?" Flat lines. "Grandfather Mountain? The ski slopes—Beech Mountain, Sugar Mountain?" Light bulbs!

Avery County is the youngest of North Carolina's one hundred counties. It was founded in 1911, when my Great Grandfather Garfield was 29 years of age. It was founded the same year my maternal grandmother was born, and a year before the Titanic sank. It borders Carter County, Tennessee to the west. Avery is the third northwestern-most county in North Carolina. It's about a hundred miles northwest of Charlotte, seventy miles northeast of Asheville, and about five hundred miles from everywhere else. It's hard or next to impossible to get there from here or anywhere else.

Roaring Creek is accessed by vehicular traffic only from the south, off U.S. Highway 19-E. It is located about fifteen miles southwest of Newland, the county seat. Up until about fifty years ago, my folks' mailing address was simply *Route 1 Newland*, without any other identifying house or road numbers. The closest decent sized grocery stores are in Banner Elk, Newland, and Spruce Pine, each close to fifteen to twenty miles away.

At one time, and I don't know for how long, Roaring Creek was named *Roan Creek*. Seeing how some of the smaller streams on Roaring Creek have their headwaters just under the Roan Highlands complex, that makes sense. There's also a good

reason why it was once called *Valley*. Even doing an online search, it is still as of this writing, sometimes designated *Valley* in online maps. It's hard to imagine now, but at one time, Valley, North Carolina even had its own post office. I have some old cards and letters stamped with the Valley postmark.

On Valley's northwestern border, the 6189-foot Grassy Ridge Bald, one of the tallest peaks east of the Mississippi, maintains a proud vigil. To the east, Big Yellow Mountain, at 5460 feet, with Big Hump Mountain watching over her shoulder, casts a watchful eye over the sons and daughters of the valley.

The name to which Place now answers is simply *Roaring Creek*. Politically, it is designated *Roaring Creek Township*. Much to my delight, even one of those popular talking/listening gadgets can give us the weather report for Roaring Creek Township. We don't talk much to ours anymore by the way, because it knows way too much, and tells everything it hears. For a long time, it resided safely and solitarily in an undisclosed location. It is currently out on good behavior, but remains so on probation.

I don't know if the native inhabitants of Roaring Creek had any mythical stories about the creation of the valley or not (I'm betting they did), but I would at least like to imagine that I know how it happened. Taoism, one of several Asian philosophies/religions, gave us the concepts of Yin and Yang. As an over-simplified explanation, Taoism (sometimes spelled Daoism) is a religion/philosophy of complementary opposites—i.e., life is predicated on opposite, yet equal, complementary principles—light and dark; good and evil; aggressive and passive; etc. As expected, it also includes male and female—opposite, equal, and yet complementary. In Taoism, male is rough, pointed, aggressive; female is soft, rounded, passive. Peacemaker that I try to be, I know some are

thinking “Hold on here! I know *lots* of passive males and *lots* of aggressive females!” Of course, but these are *general* principles from Taoism. I would tell you to take it up with Lao Tzu (also spelled Laozi/Lao-Tze), the founder, but he died about four hundred years or so before Christ.

In my 21st Century mythological re-creation, I’d like to think that Grassy Ridge is male, and that Big Yellow is female. Grassy Ridge is larger and more rugged than Big Yellow, and pointed at its apex. Big Yellow, the female counterpart, has voluptuous curves and dips, and is rounder, and softer than Grassy Ridge. I think that eons ago, Grassy Ridge and Big Yellow made passionate love, and their offspring is Roaring Creek Valley. Oh, how they doted on that gorgeous valley, their pride and joy, their one and only child, and a prodigy at that!

I grew up in a place, where, for 150 years, change has occurred in snail-like increments. It’s not so much a place that Time forgot, but one of which Time was either largely unaware or simply chose to ignore. Far from the restless, raucous influence of asphalt-covered “civilization,” Roaring Creek, is cradled by the very hand of God, between the vast fertile ridges of the Blue Ridge Mountains. East Tennesseans, whose easternmost border in Carter County touches the valley, swear that kudzu and western North Carolinians are might nigh about to take over their part of the country!

The Yellow Mountain Gap, on the valley’s westernmost border, was an important passage for the Overmountain Men in 1780. They had rendezvoused at Sycamore Shoals, in what is now Elizabethton, Tennessee. They marched up Hampton Creek in Roan Mountain, Tennessee, and over the mountain, through the Yellow Mountain Gap, down the valley, and on to a decisive battle at King’s Mountain, South Carolina.

There’s no mystery as to why Place is now called *Roaring Creek*. The valley is divided by a sizeable stream that runs a

total of about five miles or so. The main branch takes its headwaters near the Yellow Mountain Gap, and about a mile down the valley is joined by the frigid waters of Elk Hollow. In addition to some smaller, lesser-known branches, three other named creeks and or branches join the main artery—Jerry’s Creek (largest of the three), Martin’s Branch, and Mollie’s Branch. On its roaring, roiling, relentless journey to the sea, Roaring Creek winds and finds its way to Toe River. Toe River eventually morphs into the scenic and notorious Nolichucky, watery executioner of hundreds of unfortunate souls.

There are fine nuances between rivers, creeks, and branches that any true Creeker would know. They’re nuanced in terms of size. Going in reverse order would be the easiest way to explain it. A river is larger than a creek. A creek is larger than a branch. Branches are formed by the overflow of springs. Springs are the source of all streams. Abundant rain, of which the Valley usually gets plenty, keeps the majority of the springs flowing year-round.

Roaring Creek is considered to be one of America’s most scenic valleys. Admittedly, I’m biased, but at least I’m not the only one who thinks that. A real estate agent recently asked me if, while I was growing up on Roaring Creek, I ever took its beauty for granted. I was immensely gratified and proud to say without a nanosecond’s hesitation that I never did, and I certainly don’t now. I appreciated it as a child, and even more so as an adult.

From the summer of 1979, immediately following high school graduation, until the summer of 1982, I lived in Greenville, South Carolina. I moved to Greenville to attend a small Bible college. Upstate South Carolina is a nice area, and has seen tremendous growth and prosperity over the past few decades. Greenville is about a two and a half—three-hour drive from Roaring Creek.

I'm not too big and tough to admit that that brief three-year period seemed more like thirteen years rather than three. I was almost constantly homesick. Naturally a homebody, I'd never been out on my own, never paid rent or a utility bill, and had never worked a public job. With all three of those quickly becoming reality after my southward migration, life actually went very well. It turned out to be a significant rite of passage into adulthood. A friend told me just before I left in 1979 that I'd be back in six months. Well, I wasn't, but I sure wanted to be, and a couple of times he almost proved himself prophetic.

On the fateful late-June day when I left the safe womb of Roaring Creek for Greenville, I packed nearly everything I had, both boxes of it. I tossed my belongings into the back of a 1978 brown Subaru hatchback, with beige and orange stripes, and white spoke steel rims. I wound my way down Roaring Creek Road, onto Highway 19-E South; then onto Highway 194 in Ingalls; onto Highway 221, between Linville and Altamont; down through the North Cove; Marion; and Rutherfordton.

Not far out of Rutherfordton, I crossed the South Carolina state line. Right after Chesnee, South Carolina, and then near Spartanburg, I hit I-85 South. At that point, it was getting serious. I was now officially in Tiger and Gamecock country. No Carolina blue or NC State red were anywhere to be seen, just lots of Clemson orange and University of South Carolina garnet. I passed sprawling peach orchards, and saw signs advertising produce stands, boiled peanuts, and hickory-smoked pork barbeque.

I soon found steady employment, my very first stint as a real, public employee. At a BI-LO supermarket, a couple of miles from my tiny single-wide trailer, I became a food and dry goods containment specialist, aka "a bag boy." I pretty much ate off of the surprisingly good tip money. I worked during the

day, and come August through May, went to class four nights a week.

My last year of Bible college was particularly challenging, as I had a new third-shift job at a factory that produced vitamins and minerals. That midnight to 8 AM shift was torture for me, even as a twenty-year old. If I tried to do that now, it'd probably be a death sentence. The good Lord just didn't wire my constitution up in such a way as not to go to bed when normal people do.

For at least a year, my car reeked of the overpowering, pungent scent of vitamin B, and probably several other vitamins and minerals. The scent of the B vitamins overwhelmed the others. At least my car and I stayed healthy. Apparently, all those vitamins and minerals kept us both from breaking down. I did learn that if you get ascorbic acid (one of the forms of vitamin C) on leather boots or sneakers, and then get them wet, it'll eat them up like battery acid. I'm no chemist, but I'll bet that's partly why it's called ascorbic *acid*.

For three years, almost every weekend, come Friday (and, Lord forgive me, sometimes skipping a class or three on Friday night), I'd gas up that little brown Subaru and head for the blue hills of home. I couldn't get there fast enough.

Upstate South Carolina has some hills and mountains, some really nice ones actually. Caesar's Head, not far from Traveler's Rest, off Highway 25, is breathtaking. Greenville itself sparkles beneath the vigilant eye of Paris Mountain. But it wasn't home. Never was. It was a three-year endurance test, a stopping place, an important bend in the road in my personal journey. Looking back, I think I honestly cared more about just making it back home than I did the learning experience of formal schooling. But I certainly can't say that I regret it.

On my weekly pilgrimage back home, I would usually retrace the same steps as when I initially moved to South

Carolina. Sometimes I'd go home via a more direct, northern route through the South Carolina mountains; on into Hendersonville, North Carolina; then Asheville; eventually hitting good old 19-E on the northwest edge of Asheville; then on into Burnsville; Spruce Pine; finally turning left onto Roaring Creek Road. Regardless of the route I chose, all roads eventually led me back to Roaring Creek.

The most cherished memory I have of heading home for the weekend was one that occurred predictably and repeatedly. On my usual Friday sojourn back to Roaring Creek, I'd uneventfully drive up I-85 for a good thirty-five to forty-five minutes, just humdrum driving through the ever-so-slightly rolling hills of the Upstate. If it was still daylight with decent visibility, *it* would happen. Every. Single. Time. Just beyond Chesnee, South Carolina, not far out of Rutherfordton, North Carolina, there it was! Peering with intensity toward the Northwest, as far as my bespectacled eyes would allow, I'd see that unmistakable jagged, blue horizon. No more monotonous rolling hills of the piedmont, but rather my beloved Blue Ridge Mountains. They were beckoning, calling, and waving at me like a lover from whom I'd been separated by just a little over 100 miles. I'm positive that my heart would always skip a beat, and I'd get a lump in my throat. Suddenly, the drab curtains of the mostly unspectacular landscape were pushed aside, revealing the happy distant welcome of home, close enough to see, but not quite close enough to touch.

Somewhere, way over yonder, within the masterpiece of that blue fabric, was nothing more than a narrow crease, a mere wrinkle, a place where Father Time walked a little more slowly, but one which made my heart beat a little faster. I would soon leave my temporary confinement behind, even if for only a day or two. On that day, and every day that I made the pilgrimage,

Chris R. Hughes

I tried my hardest to be back home on Roaring Creek before dark.

Chapter 8: That Roaring Creek Brogue

Of all possible times and places to have had a cultural/ancestral epiphany, this was surely one of the oddest and least expected. It was on or about June 9, 2009. I was entering my second of a two-week pilgrimage to Israel with twenty-two other Christian ministers from various denominations and parts of the U.S. It was one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, for which I am profoundly grateful.

The first week of the pilgrimage had been spent in the northern part of the country, in and around Tiberias. During the second week, we stayed at ground zero, epicenter of the world, the holy city itself—Jerusalem. That second week was spent at Jerusalem’s magnificent Pontifical Institute, the Notre Dame Jerusalem center. The Notre Dame features a towering French cathedral and guest house. We stayed in the guest house, not at all lavish, but inviting, spacious, clean, and well kept. The Notre Dame is located in modern Jerusalem, directly across the street from the New Gate, one of the portals entering the walled city, Old Jerusalem.

Shortly before our first evening’s dinner, Father Kelly, an energetic, congenial Irish Catholic priest who served as our host, took our eager group to the rooftop of the one of the Notre Dame’s buildings for a visual tour. From that lofty perch, we were treated to an awe-inspiring panoramic view of the old city. It felt surreal to be standing there. I could scarcely believe that a boy from Roaring Creek was standing in that spot at that moment, staring at one of the most important places on earth.

Father Kelly gave us a quick but enormously helpful debriefing of the various sections of Old Jerusalem, particularly as they related to Jesus’ trial and Passion. Without a single written note, or map, or a moment’s hesitation, Father Kelly

directed our attention to this spot, that spot, this direction, and that, all of which related to the places and people connected to the final days and hours of Jesus' Passion. He could have done it in his sleep.

Pointing to our right, he said in his heavy Irish accent, "Over there, to the South, was the house of Caiaphas. And then Jesus was taken there...then He was taken there...and then..." (fasten your seatbelt—the moment is imminent), "He was taken *Narth* to the Antonia Fortress and appeared before Pilate...." So help me God, as I stood on a high roof overlooking the Holy City itself, that Irish priest said *Narth*. That was it. You were expecting an earth-shaking revelation, weren't you? Insignificant as it may seem, the pronunciation of that one, single-syllable word, *Narth*, was momentous for me.

I can't remember anything else Father Kelly said during that visual tour after he said *Narth*. A deep chord had been struck. Roots were unearthed. I was suddenly awash with a cascade of ancestral awareness. Hazy images whisked through my mind of early Scot-Irish settlers, finding and winding their way into the Southern Appalachians, no doubt feeling right at home.

That Irish priest unknowingly became a living window, and legitimate link to my past. I feel really dense for it to have taken me so long to realize it, but it suddenly made a lot more sense why my people spoke in our peculiar accent, pronouncing *North* as *Narth*, as but only one example.

Some things are like terrible car wrecks—you hate to look, but you just can't turn away. That's how I am when it comes to the pronunciation of our splendid words, *Appalachian* and *Appalachia*. I can't begin to tell you how appreciative I am of the fact that you're reading my book, but if we are to stay on good terms, then we have to come to an understanding. That third *a* in *Appalachian* or *Appalachia* is pronounced as the *a* in *latch*. Phonetically, the two words are *Ap-uh-latch'-un*/*Ap-uh-*

latch' -uh respectively. Just repeat those words three times and you'll have it. On the other hand, if you are obstinate in the acquisition and processing of new information, and come up on Roaring Creek and start that long *a*, *Appalāchian* mess, don't blame me if you receive a less- than-warm welcome.

Hardly anything grates on my nerves to a greater degree than hearing a poorly executed, fake Southern accent in a movie or TV show. The would-be Southern-talkers sound as if they're trying to eat a mouthful of parsnips after having a Novocain injection. Rarely do the actors and directors get it right. That being said, there's a nerve-wracking fallacy I need to clear up before I blow a gasket.

A Southern Appalachian accent is as distinct from a Deep South accent, or a Carolina Piedmont accent, or a Virginia Tidewater accent, as a Brooklyn accent is from a northern Minnesotan accent. Everyone whose accent is different from their own refers to the other as "having an accent." We *all* have accents, sweet pea, it's just a matter of *which one* we have.

You may have noticed already, but the Deep South accent often has an aversion to the letter *R*. Butter is *butta*. Letter is *letta*, etc. Conversely, the Southern Appalachian accent *loves* the letter *R*. I haven't conducted a poll or done a linguistic investigation, but I'm pretty sure that *R* is our favorite consonant.

There's not a tremendous amount that I've said thus far that differentiates the Creekers from most native Avery Countians, or for that matter, the greater Southern Appalachian region. I'd bet the farm, however, that if I were to ask local, native Avery Countians what sets Roaring Creek apart, the resounding answer would be *the dialect*, or as some would say with a bit of a smirk, "...that old Roaring Creek brogue!"

On too many occasions to recall, I vividly remember the frequent response that total strangers, native Avery Countians

at that, would exhibit upon learning that yours truly was from Roaring Creek. It would usually be accompanied by a condescending remark, pathetically attempting to duplicate the distinct Roaring Creek dialect. I'd hear, "*Rarring Crack!*" or "*Rarring Crick!*" or some such nonsense. One more car wreck: I can't let pass the fact that the pronunciation of *creek* as *crick* is normally not even Southern Appalachian. It may have a hillbilly-sounding twang, but it's actually used more in other parts of the country like the Midwest or Northeast, e.g. You're welcome.

Among linguistic scholars, some have said that the peculiar Southern Appalachian Highlands' dialect is the original one spoken in the American colonies. Some say that particular dialect can be traced all the way back to the Old English period (c. 5th—11th Centuries CE), even to towering figures such as Chaucer. Such bold declarative statements are the fodder of verbal altercations amongst the linguistic scholars and historians, neither of which I am. We can at least agree that it does indeed have its own peculiar sound.

Admittedly, the distinctive dialect of Roaring Creek is very difficult, if not impossible in some cases, to duplicate in writing. I'll give it my best shot without any guarantees. I've garnered some common Roaring Creek words and expressions, the great majority of which are commonly used in other parts of the Southern Appalachians. The list does not include some of the usual Southern Appalachian words (*taters* and *maters*, e.g.) that are as common as cornbread and catfish throughout the South. There are only a few of the words and expressions that I've listed (marked with an asterisk*) that I personally have *not* heard outside of Roaring Creek, but some of which are said to be spoken in other parts of the South. What follows is a partial list.

Agin—Against
Aig [*Ai* pronounced as *aye*]—Egg
Airy/Airy'n—A single one
Alkihaul [*ki* as in *key*]—Alcohol
Ar—Arrow
Arish—Irish
Arn—Iron
Arnge—Orange
Art—Ought, should
Artn't—Ought not, should not
Aught—The number 0 [Aught can mean: “anything at all.” E.g. “Do you know aught?” I heard only the first usage, i.e., 0.]
Awf'lst—Most awful; E.g. “That was the awf'lst racket I ever hyerd!”
Banjer—Banjo
Bile—Boil
*Brile—Broil, e.g., “Ive been out in that hot brilin' sun!”
Bryar(s) [*yar* as in *yard*]—Briar(s)
*Bum—Bomb
*B'yer [Single syllable; *er* as in *her*]—Beer
*B'yerd [Single syllable; *er* as in *her*]—Beard
Carn—Corn
Cher [*er* as in *her*]—Chair
*Cicero—0° Fahrenheit, e.g., “Hit got down to cicero last night!”
Clim—Past tense of climb
*Come in one hair—Almost; E.g. “He come in one hair of runnin' off the road!”
*C'yarn—Cairn; carrion, i.e., rotten flesh
D'mater—Tomato
Dannimite—Dynamite

*Drap—Drop

D'rectly—Shortly, momentarily e.g., “I’ll be thar d’rectly.”

Eech—Itch (Eech can be used as either a noun or a verb. E.g., “I’ve got a’ eech on my lag. I wanna eech it!”)

Far—Fire; for

Fer/Fer Piece—Far/A long ways

*Fine’ly Teetote’ly—Completely; E.g. “He fine’ly teetote’ly ren’t [ruined] his new shirt.”

Fit—Fought

*Foolish-Headed—Feeling dizzy; not feeling quite right in the head

*Gaumed up mess—A complete mess that’s been made of something. E.g., “That’s the awf’lst gaumed up mess I’ve ever seen in my life!”

Git’ar—Guitar

Haint/Hainted—Ghost or spirit/Haunted

Hain’t—Same as “ain’t;” is not/are not

Her’n—3rd person possessive *hers*

His’n—3rd person possessive *his*

Hit/Hit’s/Hits—It/It is/Its

*Hope—Help—can be either present tense “I need fer ye to hope me;” or past tense “If you hadn’t a hope me, I would’t a got done.”

*Hyerd [*er* as in *her*]—Heard

If I had to die!—Exclamatory expression equivalent to, “That is unbelievable!”

*I’ll swan!—Exclamatory expression such as “Oh my goodness!”

Lag—leg

Lard—Lord, as in “the good Lord”; lard, as in hardened animal fat.

- Learn—In the mountain dialect, learn is often used for “teach.” E.g., “Can you learn me how to play the git’ar?”
- *Long-Headed—Wild or unruly in conduct e.g., “Look goin’ at that long-headed thang!”
- *Mess—A hearty portion of food, e.g. “I cooked a mess of backbones and ribs.”
- *Motisicle—Motorcycle
- Narth—North
- Nary/Naryn/Nary singl’ one—Not one/Not a single one
- *Neen—Need not, needn’t
- *O Thee—Touché!
- *Pitch and Stave—To walk as if intoxicated or in an awkward manner
- *Plime Blank—Exactly, precisely [Said to be used outside of Roaring Creek, but I have not personally heard it.]
- *Pizen [long i]—Poison
- Plum—completely
- Plum Foolish—Completely crazy; ridiculous
- Pone—Either a swollen area of the body, e.g. “My wrist is poned up”; or a cake of bread, e.g., “a *pone* of cornbread”
- Pyert—[*er* as in *her*]—Pert; energetic
- Quare—Queer as in strange or odd. “He acts sarter quare.”
- Raynch [*ay* as in *aye*]—A wrench; to wrench; rinse
- Rern’t—Ruined
- Sarter—Sort of
- *Sack Naz/The Old Sack Naz—Satan, or the devil [My maternal grandmother is the only person from

whom I ever heard this expression. I've no idea where it originated.]

Sodie Pop/A Dope—Soda pop

Sot—A severe alcoholic

Tar(s)—Tire(s)

Ther'n—3rd person possessive *theirs*

Tore up/Tore all t' pieces—Fairly common Southern Appalachian terms meaning broken, broken down, destroyed. E.g. "He wrecked his motisicle and tore hit all t' pieces."

War—Wire

Warry—Worry

Winder [Short *i* as in *win*]—Window

*Wisht'm'never—Exclamatory term expressing shock or surprise similar to "Oh my goodness!!"

Womern—Woman

Yaller—Yellow

*Yander—Same as yonder

Youn's—2nd person plural [Note: I don't recall *ever* hearing any of my people use the common Southern term, "ya'll."]

Your'n—2nd person singular possessive your/yours

Yourn'ses—2nd person plural possessive your/yours

*Yer(s) [*er* as in *her*]—ear(s)

I'm as certain as death and taxes that there are probably a bushel basket of words and expressions that I forgot to include, and some that I deliberately omitted because of the sheer volume. So, the preceding list is merely representative. I've been fascinated for some time with some other aspects of *that old Roaring Creek brogue* that reach beyond vocabulary and expressions. Let's look at those.

My Uncle Clyde (mother's side) used some of the oddest expressions that I've ever heard. It was decades before I realized that many of those expressions meant absolutely nothing, and were based on absolutely nothing. They just came from somewhere in his mind. For example, he'd say "That gentleman come one hair of goin' up the Joe Road!" *Joe Road* referred to nothing. It was just a Clydeism that meant "He almost died or encountered tragedy."

We once had a pastor at the Missionary Baptist church to whom Clyde referred as "Little Charlie." That wasn't the pastor's name, and the pastor, not a local, couldn't figure out to save his life, to whom Clyde was referring. He was referring to absolutely no one. It was just a name that popped into his head.

One more: "He's nearly ready for the green coat!" It was another Clydeism that was evocative of men in white lab clothes taking someone away to a psychiatric facility. Again, *green coat* corresponded to nothing that was literally true.

For reasons that are beyond my expertise, a lot of Creekers have a strong aversion to the schwa sound, i.e., vowels pronounced as "uh." For example, California is pronounced by some as Californie; Georgia is pronounced as Jargie; dynamite is pronounced dannimite.

What's really interesting is when we get into proper names with a schwa ending. I was nearly grown before I realized that some of my fellow Creekers had official given names far different from what I ever knew. Cousin Verna was always pronounced *Vernie*; cousin Coda was *Cody*; cousin Eva was *Evie*; Laura was either *Lar* or *Laurie*.

I've had some personal experience with the schwa prejudice. My wife's name is Tonia. The first time I introduced her to my maternal Grandmother Hazel, the latter said (with perfectly good pronunciation) "I can't say 'Tonia,' I'll just call

you ‘Connie.’” That’s proof positive of schwa discrimination if ever there was any such proof!

A telling indicator of one’s Creek background is the pronunciation of the diphthongs “ai” and “ou.” Get your mind out of the gutter—a diphthong has nothing to do with lingerie or swimwear. A diphthong is a vowel combination that creates one sound when pronounced. Two examples: *haunted* and *our*. “Au” in *haunted*, and “ou” in *our* are both diphthongs.

I don’t think that I am able adequately to express the distinctive “ai” and “ou” pronunciation in writing, but I’ll give it a try. Here are few representative words. *Ayair* = Air—the stuff we breathe. You have to try and imagine someone pronouncing that word with their lower lip twisted to one side and pronouncing it almost like a pirate saying *Arrrgh*. *Haiyr* = hair. Then there’s *ou*. *Auer* = (depending on context) *our* or *hour*. The “a” is short “a” as in “at.” Both examples are pronounced as single syllable words. Sorry, I did my best, but you’re on your own with the rest of it.

The Creek dialect dislikes the *or* sound—George, Orange, Horse, Gorge, North, etc. Again, my assumption is that this came across the Atlantic from the British Isles. If you listen closely to some citizens from the UK, you can hear this sound, particularly it seems, by those from Scotland or Ireland. *Or* gets replaced by *ar*. In my short list above—*Jarge* = George; *Arnge* = Orange; *Harse* = Horse; *Linville Garge* = Linville Gorge; *Narth* = North, etc.

Another linguistic peculiarity (and I’m probably forgetting some others of no small importance) is also beyond my power of explanation. Creekers use a lot of truncated or cut-off names. Tons of people throughout my life have asked me if my official name is *Christopher*. It is not, and that’s just as well, because I would’ve been called Chris (or worse) anyway. It’s not a respect or lack thereof issue, it’s simply an idiom of the dialect.

Great Grandfather, Baptist preacher Garfield, was affectionately referred to by nearly everyone as *Gyar*, or *Preacher Gyarfield*. Paternal Grandfather Robert was *Rob*, and his wife, Grandmother Nellie, was *Nell*. Cousin Irene was simply *Reen*. Way back generations ago before my time, there was a Webb gentleman name Nebraska, but I always heard him referred to as *Brack*, and another named Sylvester, who was referred to as *Vester*.

Those with initial names such as J.G. and S.D. had it made. One of my best buddies from childhood was a leather-tough, sinewy little Young fellow from Martin's Branch, one of our hollers on Roaring Creek. His given name was Garrett Coyd Young, but no one knew him by any other name than simply *G.C.* I swear by the hair that used to be on my head that we, well, maybe I, found a way to shorten even *G.C.* Sometimes we simply called him *G.*

One of the peculiarities of *Creekeese* is the manner of differentiation between *Senior* and *Junior*. It seems that in most cases if a male happened to be Junior (George, Jr. e.g.), he would likely be referred to simply as *Junior*. My parents' first child was George Jason, Jr., the one who died during birth. Had he lived, he more than likely would have been known as *Junior Hughes*.

There was one other manner of distinguishing Senior and Junior, and that was by use of the adjectives *Big* and *Little*. E.g., there once was a father/son tandem named Hamilton Hopson, Sr. and Hamilton Hopson, Jr., known to all of us simply as *Big Ham* and *Little Ham*. That may seem odd, but there was no confusion as to whom was being referenced.

Language and the ability to communicate distinguish us as human. Admittedly, geography and culture can often make our communication a challenge. I have a devil of a time understanding the good folks from the Northeast. To my slow-

processing ears, combined with a hearing impairment, their accent, coupled with their rapid speech and sometimes-brusque manner, makes their communication sound like a roomful of guinea fowl pecking on electric typewriters. Just keeping it real here.

It was sometime in the mid-1970's that I, minding my own business on a warm summer day, found myself walking down the dusty gravel road about a quarter of a mile below my house. I don't remember where I was going, but just a few yards past the People's Church, right before the gravel road ended and the paved road began, a strange car approached. *Strange*, in this context, meaning *not recognizable as belonging to us*. It was a nice-looking car, a 70-something Ford LTD, light blue, dark blue vinyl roof, without a single scratch, dent, or rattle that I could detect. Everybody knew everybody else's car or truck. This clean, shiny, blue LTD stood out like a piano in a Church of Christ.

As the blue Ford approached, a bespectacled gentleman, who looked as clean and shiny as his alien craft, lowered his driver's window and clearly wanted to communicate. With words that sounded to my large ears like the clanking and crunching of an eleven-car pileup, he said in a very hurried tone "Pardonme, butcanyoutellmehowtogetto Crunbereé?"

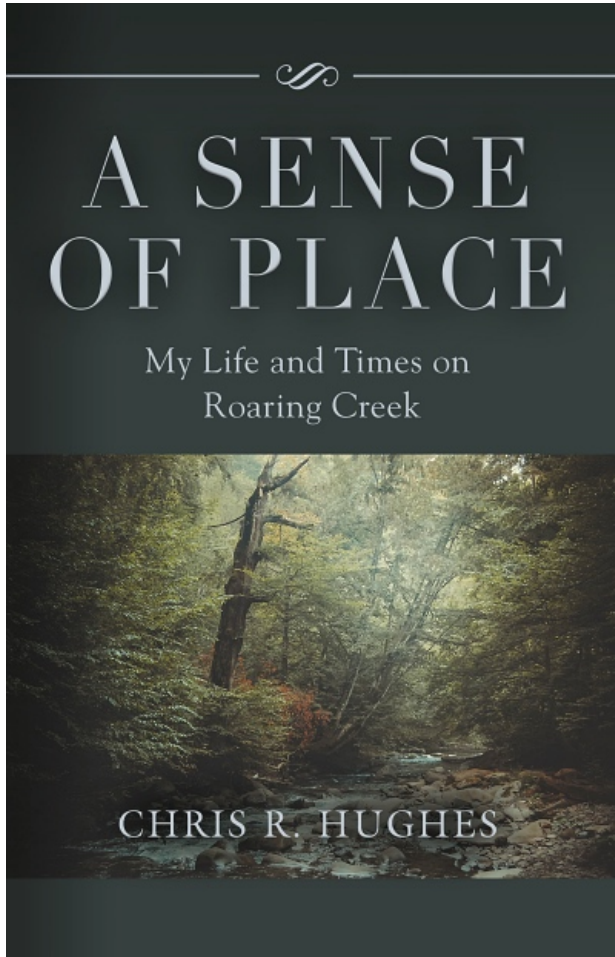
There were a couple of other people in the car, but they didn't say anything. I'm no detective, but I clearly and quickly deducted that he *wasn't from around here*. "Sppiittt," said the tobacco juice launched from my lips, and I said, "Doo whaat?" Understand that a Creeker can turn two simple one-syllable words into at least four syllables. But this was my turf, and at least I didn't talk like I had a mouthful of bumblebees. He repeated his statement which, from the inflection of the words, I realized was a question. "Canyoutellmehowtogetto Crunbereé?" I was proud of my ability to follow a foreign

language, at least partially, and did pretty well except for that last, strongly inflected word in his hurried question, *Crunbereé*. I really and truly did want to help Mr. Spick and Span and the befuddled passengers in his shiny light blue Ford, but *Crunbereé*? I was clueless. “Spippiitt. Noo, I ain’t never hyerd of it.”

He thanked me just the same and wheeled his LTD around in the parking lot of the People’s Church to head back in the other direction. As he passed me, I saw that his car tag said *Ontario*. I definitely had the geographical part of this mystery man down pat—by golly, he really wasn’t from around here! He was a *loooong* ways from here!

Like a bolt of lightning on top of Big Yellow Mountain, it struck me. Being a lad with keen powers of deduction, I finally figured out that *Crunbereé* had to be *Cranberry*, a little unincorporated community, about ten miles north or fifteen minutes’ drive from where I had stood, talking unintelligibly to somebody in a nice blue LTD from Ontario.

I sincerely hope that my polite neighbor from north of the border found his way to *Crunbereé*, and that he eventually forgave that unhelpful twelve-year-old with the blank stare. And if I did inadvertently get any tobacco spit on that shiny light blue Ford, it was purely unintentional.



In the heart of North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains, lies a community called Roaring Creek. A Sense of Place: My Life and Times on Roaring Creek explores the author's connection to and reflections on this Southern Appalachian Highlands community.

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