

INTRODUCTION

The group of individuals that composed the little community of Tunnel Hill in Whitesburg, Letcher County Kentucky in the late 1940's, 1950's, 1960's, and the 1970's was no different than hundreds of thousands of other individuals in communities all across America. It's true that poverty was more prevalent in Appalachia during that period than in most sections of the nation but it's also true that people find a way to survive and even prosper in the hardest of times. Our family and most of our neighbors weren't people of wealth by any means but there are different classifications of wealth which mean different things to different people. Tunnel Hill's wealth was invested in an area that we all had an investment in. Our common investment was the people, and especially the children of our community. The friendliness and kindness of our neighbors and the bond that we felt as a closely knit neighborhood made us much richer in our quality of life despite the difficult financial times.

The children gave the neighborhood the vitality, energy, and the enthusiasm needed for any small community to survive. You could look out your window almost any time of the day to see young ones playing in the old dirt road which wound up the hill. If they weren't playing within sight you could be sure they were around somewhere close with their antics. None of them

were bored with life because there was always something to do in the outdoors to keep them busy.

There were no modern conveniences such as air conditioners, heat pumps, and very few, if any, electric ranges for cooking anywhere in our neighborhood. That meant that when we weren't out of the house playing somewhere we were probably chopping wood for the heating stove, fireplace, or coal cook stove. There was very little idle time for most children in our neighborhood. That fact helped us to enjoy life to the greatest extent we could with our limited resources. Even most of those people in the neighborhood fortunate enough to have a full time job had to struggle at times, especially when the frequent layoffs came.

Most of our neighbors were employed in the coal mining industry and those coal mining jobs were subject to the "boom or bust" cycle. The mines were in the bust cycle in the years that are the main subject of this book. As an example, my own Dad worked for at least eleven different coal companies in the period from 1937 to 1957. He was never fired for cause while working, but layoffs were common and accounted for his working for so many companies over those years. There was very little opportunity to greatly improve one's lives in these circumstances. This made having good neighbors even more important to us.

That's why Tunnel Hill was such an interesting place to grow up for myself and the dozens of children that made up our group of friends all those years ago. The lack of money meant very little for us because we were so used to doing without it anyway. All the entertainment we desired was to be able to go to the movies once in a while and maybe even buy a bag of

popcorn to enjoy while we were there. We never turned down an opportunity to earn a few cents needed to buy a pop or a bar of candy at the Hilltop Grocery from time to time. Sometimes we would knock on neighbor's doors to see if they needed any firewood chopped or needed a fresh bucket of drinking water brought from the spring located in front of the old abandoned coal mine. We didn't always receive pay for our work but we would do the chore anyhow. We knew that most people would pay you something if they could afford it. We figured if they didn't offer anything they didn't have it. Everything was done on a trust basis in our little circle of friends.

If someone on the hill was preparing a meal and needed some meal ,flour, or maybe an egg or two to finish the dish, they would send one of the children (or go themselves) to borrow the needed item or items. Of course the borrowed item was never paid back, nor was it expected to be paid back. We were all more like family than neighbors. If a child happened to be playing some distance from home and was hungry they only had to go to the nearest house where they would be given a piece of cornbread or a biscuit to munch on. If a meal happened to be on the table they would usually be ushered inside to join the family in sitting down to eat.

Very few, if any, doors were locked at night and even when residents expected to be gone for a weekend they would leave their doors unlocked. I can't ever remember seeing my parents locking our doors when going to Knott County, Kentucky to stay the weekend with our grandparents. I don't believe we even had locks on our doors in the four or five homes we lived in on the hill. We knew that if a stranger took a step on the road leading up the hill, someone in the

neighborhood would be aware of their every move. We felt completely secure in our homes.

The trust and security we felt during my childhood was violated in only one instance in my memory. That one incident occurred when we had gone on vacation for a few days in 1960. A neighbor's older boy went into the house and helped himself to two watches that I and my sister Marlene had gotten for Christmas. A Good Samaritan informed us on our return and the young man admitted the deed. Our security system of sorts had worked.

One incident in all those years can't possibly dampen the spirits of those of us who believe that we lived in a very unique neighborhood with a varied and unique population that enjoyed life to its fullest. I have spent much time over the years in relating to my children and grandchildren the little incidents of my childhood while living on Tunnel Hill and in other places. Each time I have told them an amusing or sad incident that occurred there they would respond by saying, "When are you going to write a book so we can read some more of the things you experienced while living on that hill?" I would always say something like, "I will someday, or, I will when I get time." I suppose a lot of other grandparents have used those same excuses with their grandchildren over the years.

At birth I had been so frail and sickly that Dr. B.F. Wright had informed my parents that I had six years at most to live. He said that my Mom had experienced an unusually long length of time in childbirth and the experience had been very traumatic for her and the baby. (Me) He suggested to them that they should make sure that I had a good and easy life the few years I would likely be with them. Understandably this information

made them much more protective with me than would have normally been the case .This probably explains why my parents never spanked me when I misbehaved enough to need a spanking. This prediction also explains the title of this book.

When I turned six years of age Mom finally related to me what Doctor Wright had said about his diagnosis of a short life for me. This might have been a mistake on her part as I afterwards took advantage of the non-spankings that I knew I had always enjoyed for some reason. Another reason that telling me was probably a mistake was that the prediction was constantly on my mind after that. When I would get sick I would instantly think that maybe my time had come at last. Even in later years when a bad case of flu or some other common illness would set in I would wonder if Doctor Wright's prediction was at last coming true.

Each year that passed after my sixth birthday gave me a little more hope of overcoming the odds of making it to adulthood. I believe all the time I spent exploring the outdoors was a big contributing factor to my beating the odds. I never worried too much about the dangers of rafting on the North Fork of the Kentucky River with our Tunnel Hill gang nor did I worry about the danger of catching typhoid fever from our Bill Doug Swimming Hole. I just strived to live my life to the fullest and had the most fun in doing so that I possibly could.

The Tunnel Hill of my childhood has undergone some changes with the passing of the years. The road that goes to the top of the hill has now been blacktopped and some newer homes have been built. Most of the people I knew then are no longer with us. They will always be missed with the greatest of nostalgic memories possible. I wanted to tell just a little bit

about their lives and the lives of my family who lived there so long ago, especially about those younger ones with whom I enjoyed so many wonderful adventures .

One of the most difficult things I have ever done is to recall childhood incidents I have tried to forget. Also one of the most enjoyable things I have ever done is to recall childhood incidents I have tried to forget. This contrast in terms is due to the fact that to bring even the most painful memories out in the open can be therapeutic in some way. At least I have found it to be so.

It is recorded that General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson of the Confederate Army was once asked by a young man what advice the General could give him about being successful in life? General Jackson allegedly replied to him, “Deprive yourself young man, deprive yourself!”

If deprivation is the key to success, the residents of Tunnel Hill during my childhood must have been some of the most successful people in recorded history!