



Reflections on a Journey

Garland C. Elmore



REFLECTIONS ON A JOURNEY

Garland C. Elmore

Part One GOING HOME

Interstate 77 crosses Brush Creek close to Athens. Coming from Indiana, the view from the bridge is a reminder that we are just about there—almost to my home town. On the West Virginia Turnpike bridge, at 70 mph, the fleeting glimpse of the gorge sparks a memory of an equally impressive perspective from below.





From below, hidden from the Turnpike traffic, the tree-lined lane leading to Brush Creek reminds me of a special time and of many sanctuaries that a boy with a new driver's license could discover within a few miles from Athens.

This point on Brush Creek, with bridge infrastructure constructed along its banks in the early 1960's, was a favorite destination in high school and college. It isn't much different today.





Old Athens Road hasn't changed much either. The rolling farmland just before Ray's parents' house is as I remember it 45 years ago.

In a few moments I arrive in Athens. From a few hundred feet above, it's just another place. Churches, a school, a few businesses. And a college.





SPEED
LIMIT
15

GEORGE
UNIVERSITY
FOUNDED 1875
THE GEORGE UNIVERSITY



To a young person growing up in Athens, Concord, “the friendly college on the campus beautiful,” offered more than classes.

Living as we did on the edge of campus, Concord College (now University) was a playground for my good friend David and me. I recognize now that David and I grew up in a park! The campus was ours! We shared it with other friends.



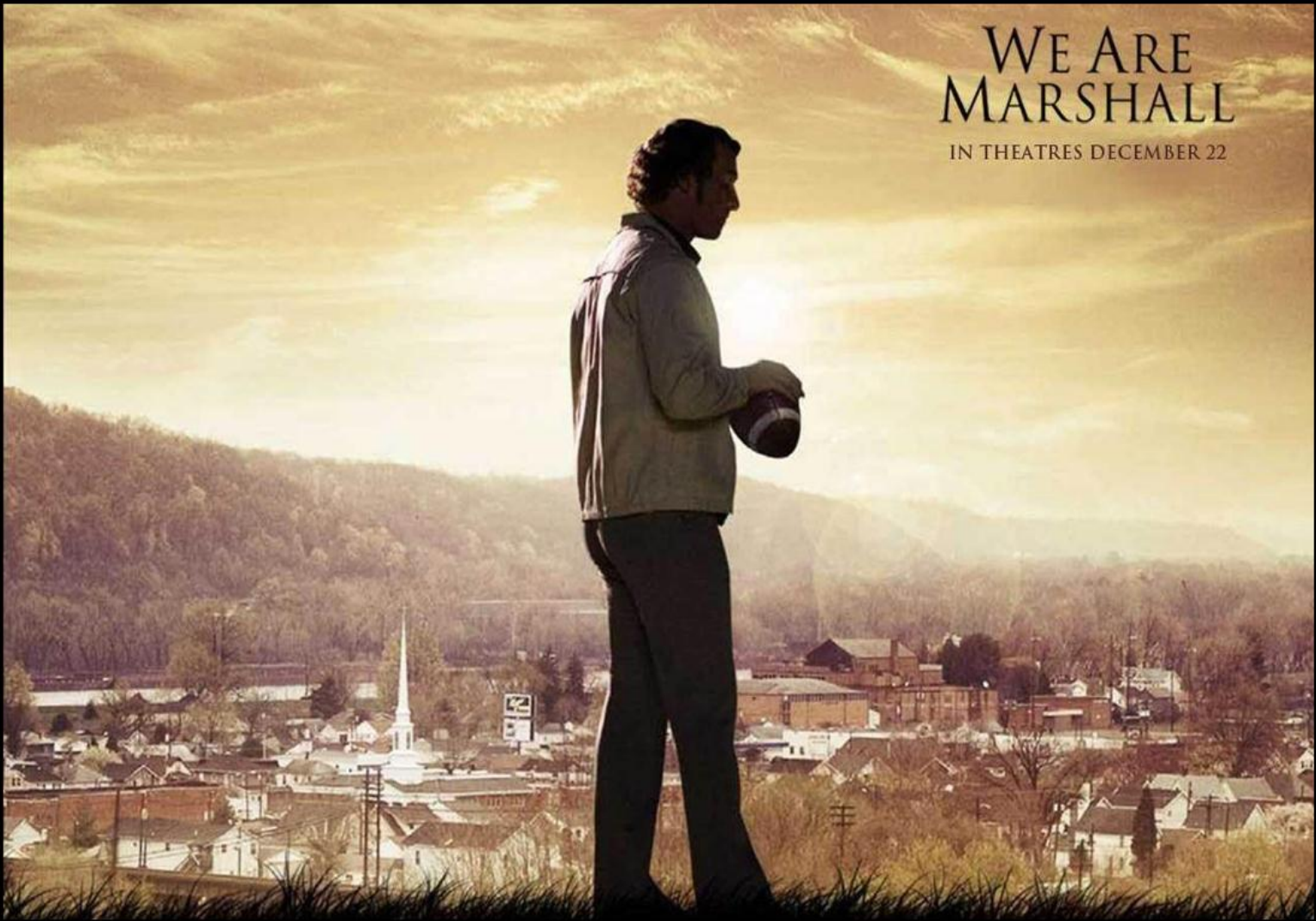
My closest friends and I were good kids. We had parents who cared. But as we approached adolescence David and I pilfered Viceroy's from my sister and learned to smoke cigarettes under these trees.

Later, many of us received a good education at Concord. It was then known as "Little Dartmouth" because that was the President's alma mater and he was advancing restrictive admissions and higher academic standards.





I graduated during the Vietnam-era to an uncertain future. I moved to Huntington to attend Marshall University in 1968. Another park! There I had a teaching assistantship and my first serious brush with tragedy ...



... when three of my students died, along with the entire Thundering Herd football team and cheerleaders, as well as Marshall supporters, in a plane that crashed into the mountain short of the Huntington airport.



Soon thereafter, the Army called and I moved to Louisiana for basic and advance military training.

I returned from Fort Polk to my first full-time teaching assignment at Southern West Virginia Community College. Jean was on the Nursing faculty, having just graduated from the University of Michigan. She caught my attention at the graduation ceremony in May. I asked if she would join me for lunch after the event. We picked up hot dogs from the Dairy Queen and had an impromptu picnic at Chief Logan park. Three days later we were planning a June wedding. Jean imagined that we would marry in three weeks but I assumed *next* June. We caught this little misunderstanding while scheduling family meetings. We compromised with a December wedding. Jean then joined me in Athens, Ohio where I had moved that summer to begin my doctoral residency.





Ohio University provided yet another pastoral setting. After finishing my course work it was time for Jean to complete her graduate studies. That took us to the Indiana University School of Nursing in the fall of 1976.

As Jean studied I completed my dissertation. We had planned to stay in Indiana for three years and then begin our *real* careers. Instead, we both accepted faculty appointments at Indiana University and the three year stint lasted 35 years! Our daughter Erin was born in 1982 and was raised in Indiana. She met Austin in North Carolina after graduating from Wake Forest University. They married in 2008.





Erin grew up in Indiana.



She and Austin were married after Erin graduated from Wake Forest University in North Carolina.

Part Two RECONNECTING

Having spent so much of my life in the relative comforts of academe, and anticipating retirement from Indiana University, I started thinking about roots. My earliest years centered around friends and their families who lived in small town America. In many ways the people of Athens were reflected in Norman Rockwell caricatures created in the 1950's and 60's. I didn't realize until recently that the place and time were special and rare.



Photo: My good friend David and his family
at their home in Athens.

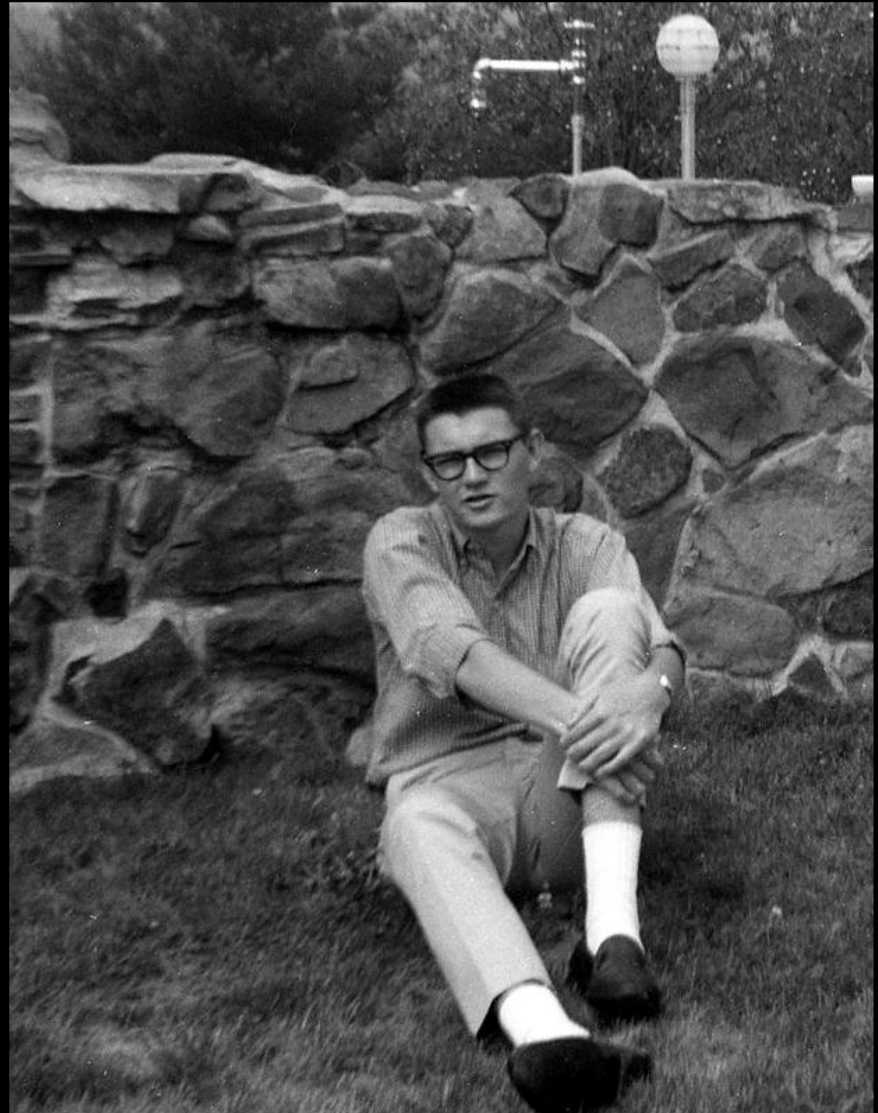


It was in the autumn of 2010 that I happened across a *Facebook* posting. Mary Joe wrote about being sad on that twelfth anniversary of the passing of her father, Andy. I hadn't seen Andy or Mary Joe's mother, Llewellyn, since 1968. After college I left Athens, went to graduate school, served in the military, returned to school, got married, and pursued a career. My wife Jean and I raised our daughter Erin. I hadn't looked back.

When I read Mary Joe's note I wished I had called Andy and Llewellyn at least once during the last several decades. I wished they would have known how much I appreciate the environment they created to welcome us teenagers into their home.

Andy built a patio with a stone fireplace and water fountain for our group to use on Friday and Saturday evenings. When the weather was bad we enjoyed music from an RCA 45-rpm record player in Llewellyn's beauty salon attached to their home. I guess the obvious lay dormant for many years, but Andy and Llewellyn, and indeed all of our parents, actually *liked us*.

The telephone has never been my friend. I don't know why. Jean answers the phone and originates most of the calling from our home. Even so, I *could* call Mary Joe. I *could*. I found her phone number and dialed before I lost courage.



Mary Joe and I talked for a long time and she asked if I had been in touch with others from our group. I mentioned that I received a call over a decade ago from Alice Jane (AJ), who had found my name in a directory while working on a book project. AJ was my first date, if dressing up and walking to a church banquet can count as a date.

Mary Joe asked if I had talked with Phyllis. “No, but I *could* call her if you have her number....” I called and reminded Phyllis of my surprise sixteenth birthday. It was on that day that Phyllis welcomed me to my party with a kiss! My first! I talked with her husband, our classmate Billy Joe, and confessed I had a crush on Phyllis when I was 15. I told Phyllis about this crush. She said she didn’t know and added, “but you took Mary to the prom.” Yes, I did.

I also had a crush on Mary.



Phyllis and Mary had remained good friends. I got another phone number!

When Mary and I talked it was like those 45 years disappeared. I asked where she had met her husband and if I could meet him through the telephone. She passed the phone to

Ken, and I heard her say: "This is Garland Elmore. He was my Junior Prom date and he wants to talk with you." What kind of introduction was that? I more or less apologized for the abrupt, unexpected introduction. Ken

was gracious. He said, "Garland, Mary is as lovely today as she was when you took her to the Prom." I immediately knew that I would like Ken. He and I had a good chat.

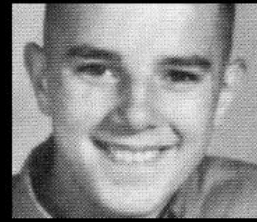




Mary remembered her pink Prom dress and my matching carnation. At our table were Milburn and Barbara, Henry and Claudia, Mary and me, and Bobby and Rose.

Many of us had grown up together. In reconnecting, we remembered the special occasions and little things that had been tucked away in our minds. We noted that it was difficult to describe a place where parents knew each other and every home was an extension of our own. Mary shared her family photos with me. I was delighted to find this picture of Mary and me at James' birthday party.





The reconnecting had just begun. I got to know Billy Joe better. I called by childhood boyfriends David, Henry, Ray and Tom. I contacted Betty Mae. I called my first cousin, Jim. I located Claudia, Alice Jane, James, Paul, Nancy, Barbara and Milburn. I called Rose and we began to think about a reunion. In every case we picked up our friendship where we left it 45 years ago! We are all different than we were in high school, but yet still very much the same.

In reconnecting with high school friends I ran a Google search for Sue, my college girlfriend and first love.

The search returned the obituary of her husband Jerry, our Concord classmate, who had passed away only a few weeks earlier. I was sad and sorry that we had not stayed in touch through the years.

I contacted Sue and we talked by phone about Jerry, Jean, our families, and many things that had happened in our lives since we parted in 1967.

Sue had retired from teaching. I explained to her that I never really left school, having spent nearly my entire life on college campuses.



Interlude
**WHY DID I NEVER
LEAVE COLLEGE?**

*"It appears to be a good way to
prolong adolescence."*

Ray Wagoner
Doctoral Advisor

*"Oh, I remember when you said
you weren't going to college."*

Helen Elmore
Mother





Ray's unexpected comment was in response to a serious career question. I had completed my doctorate, now what? I enjoyed being *in* classes, *around* college students, and *immersed* in campus life. I had looked forward to graduating, but when the day came I was like a baby bird on the edge of his nest. Fly? Scary.

Ray seemed to understand intuitively, perhaps because he had experienced the same thing in his own youth. He said without hesitation that I should pursue a university faculty appointment. He added, in parting, that I would find it to be "a great way to prolong adolescence." We laughed. I didn't think he was serious. Now I know he had it right.

I believe I was approaching 50 years old when I received a promotion and Mom said, “Oh, I remember when you said you weren’t going to college.” I had heard that statement a hundred times since I was in high school. I had heard it enough. I said, “Mom, I *did* go to college. I finished my degree. I went on for a master’s degree. I *have* a Ph.D. I’m a dean at a major university. Why do you keep bringing that up?”

The answer wasn’t very satisfying. “Well, when you said *that* your dad and I just decided not to say anything and hope you would change your mind.”

What? What was I missing?



Part Three THE PAST

From an early age I knew that my parents, and the parents of my friends, had overcome substantial obstacles through commitment and hard work, having grown up during the Great Depression and having lived through World War II. As their children in Athens we learned more about life in Rockwell's America than we knew at the time. For my part, I had grown up in a park, on a college campus, and I didn't think much about poverty or sacrifice. That stuff was way back there, in the past somewhere. It didn't affect me.

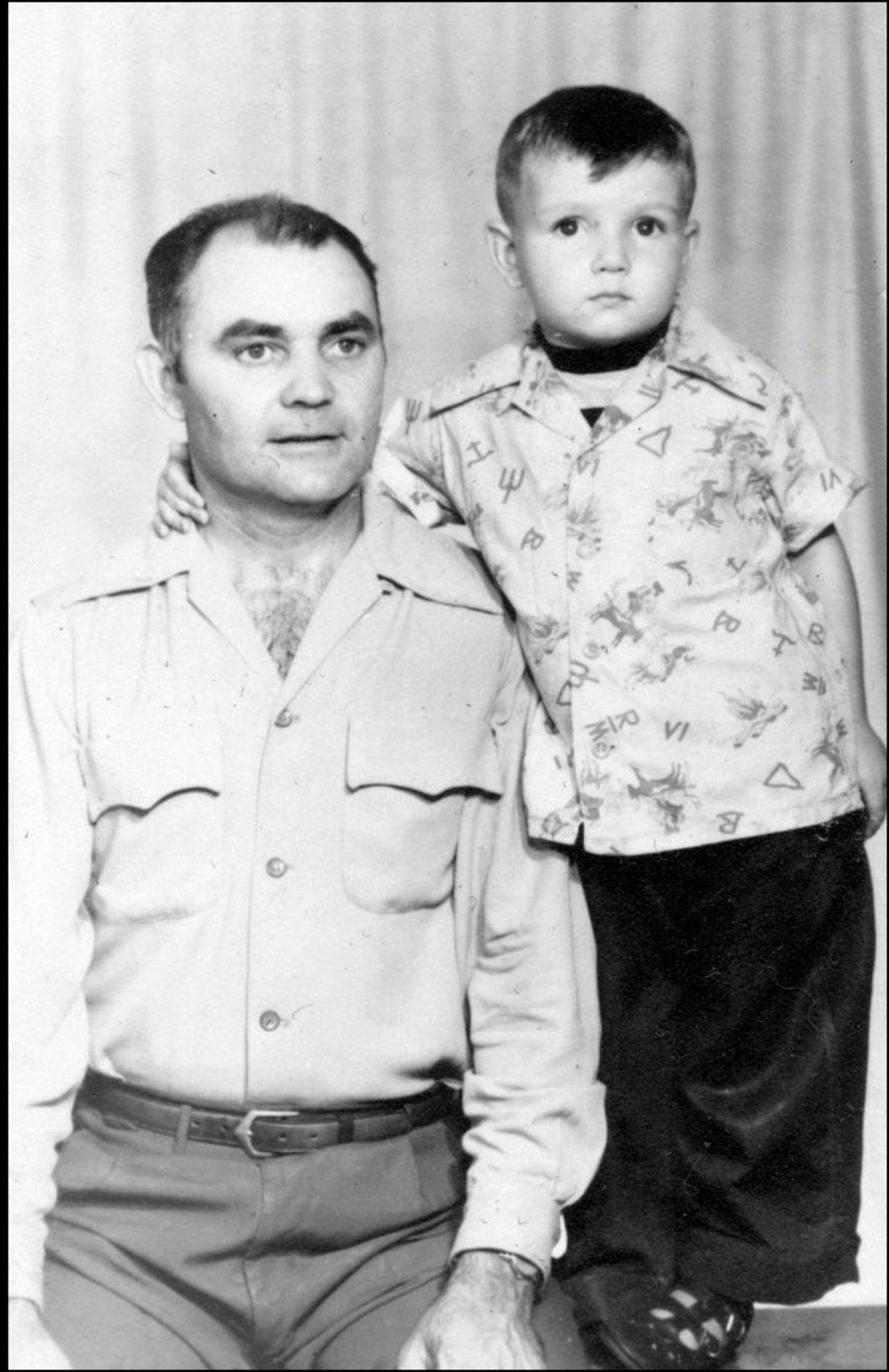
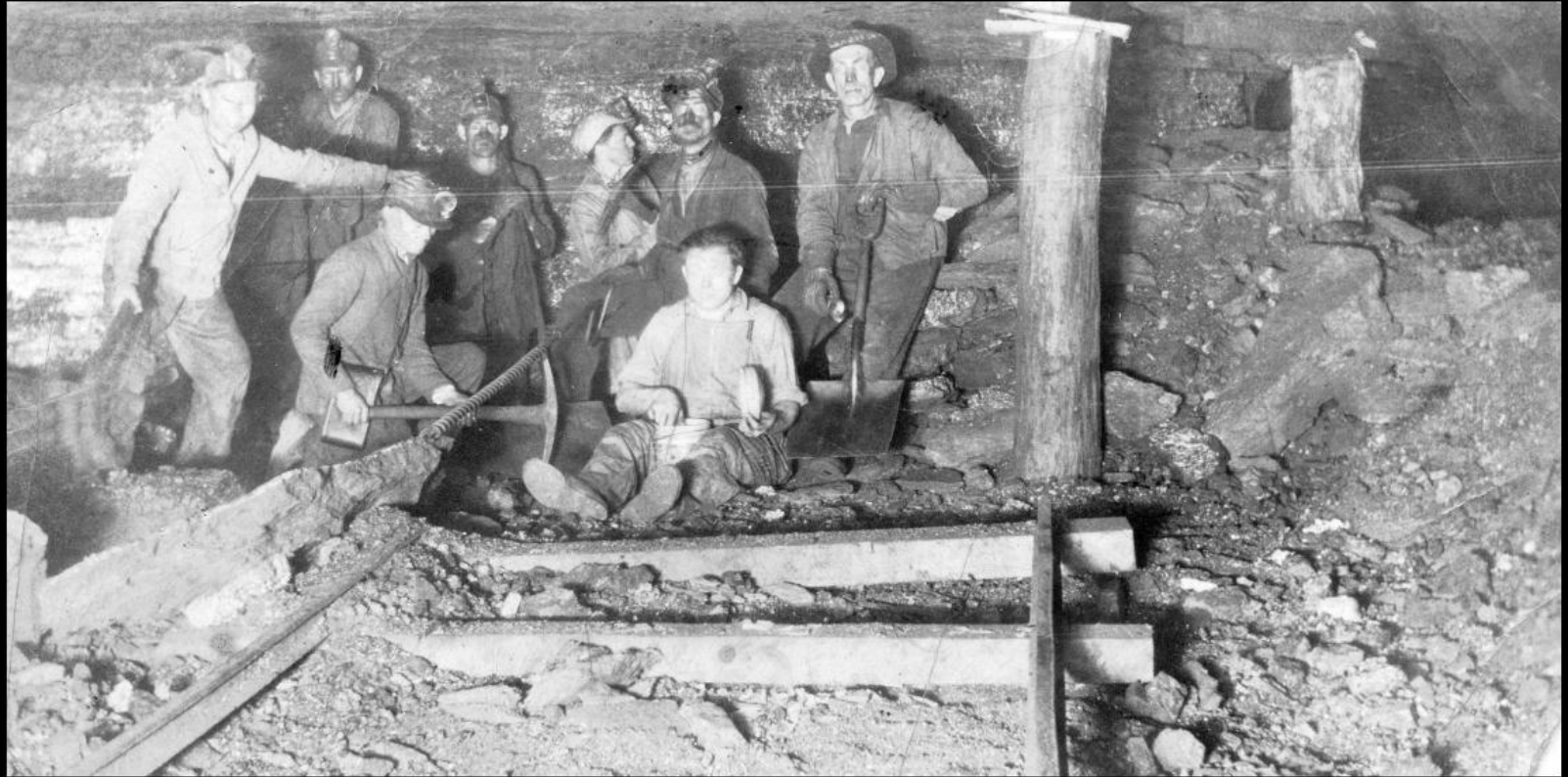


Photo: Dad, Garland Sr., and me at about the time we moved to Athens.





It was different for my dad, shown on the opposite page second from the left. His mom died when he was 15 years old. His dad, my paternal grandfather, Bert, was left with full responsibility for their six children.

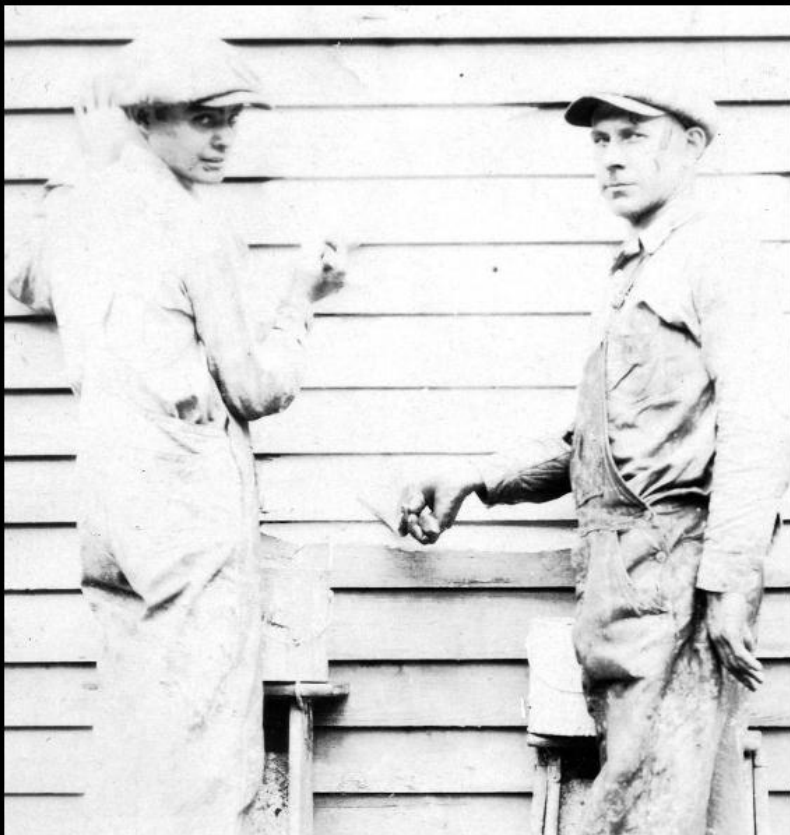
Dad (above with pick) quit school in the eighth grade to work underground with Bert (far right). Mining was hard and dangerous work, using dynamite and hand tools, with only an acetylene light on his hat to break the darkness. Raymond, center, was the brother of the young woman Dad would marry.



Dad and Mom, Helen, were married in Princeton in 1932. He was 23 years old and she was 19.

They began married life and raising their children, my four sisters and me, in a mining town owned by the American Coal Company. Dad had asthma, was developing black lung, and by this time was having a difficult time breathing underground.





His respiratory problems eventually became insufferable so Dad was reassigned from the mines to work above ground, repairing and painting the tippie and company-owned houses.





Four girls—Mary, Thelma, Nancy, Martha—were born in McComas. I came along last. Times were hard. Dad took extra jobs wherever he could. It was difficult to find work beyond the American Coal Company. The company provided jobs, housing, and services. It owned the store, offered a doctor, and managed the entire enterprise. American Coal gave workers a living, a means to support their families when the bare necessities were difficult to come by. But it was almost impossible to break out of the poverty cycle.



Photo: My sister Mary beside the Company Store.



There was no check or cash in Dad's pay envelope. Instead, American Coal provided scrip, negotiable only for company-provided goods and services. Cash was rarely available, but when offered it wasn't at face value.



Except for odd jobs found after a full day's work with American, Dad was completely dependent on the company. Scrip provided an effective mechanism for the company to enforce loyalty and worker commitment.

Dad's pay envelopes reflect the reality: 126 hours worked at 32 cents per hour and 6 hours at 25 cents. Deductions for mining supplies, rent, coal used and doctor visits, \$22.05. Take home pay for June, 1933: \$19.77.

Most of the scrip returned to American Coal through its company store where the family bought food, clothing, and an occasional gift or treat for the kids or for those in greater need.

One of my few memories of McComas is enjoying a Nehi strawberry pop with Dad in the store sundry. The store, located in the center of town, distributed turkeys as Christmas bonuses from the company. Miners lined up to receive their bonus and December pay.



I wasn't fully aware of their poverty until my parents passed away. In sorting out Mom's belongings, Jean and I found letters between them written while Dad was in Arizona looking for additional work and hoping for relief from his asthma. In one exchange Mom wrote that there was no food for the girls and she wanted to butcher the cow for meat. Dad said *no* and argued that the cow was their only resource, and she was providing milk.

Reading the letters reminded me of a mysterious story about a chicken which flew into a nail and died. I now suspect Mom killed the chicken.

My guess is that her nail explanation didn't hold up and the little deception later became a private joke between Mom and Dad.





My parents and four sisters got through the hardest years and took their first vacation in 1946. The road trip to Florida included four new bicycles for my sisters to enjoy on the beach. I went too, but I was only 9 months old.



Mary



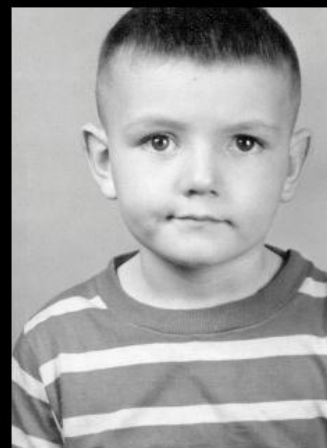
Thelma



Nancy



Martha



Garland

Mary was in high school and my other three sisters weren't far behind. Dad and Mom knew that they somehow had to keep their children in school. Concord College was not far away, but it would be difficult to find the money needed to commute or pay room and board in a residence hall.



Dad found a way to pay tuition and room for Mary's first semester at Concord. She loved music; the photo above is from an early college performance. The little coal mining girl was sophisticated and my parents were proud of her! Although he never talked about education, Dad knew that it was the key to unlocking the American Dream, and Mary was the first in our family to step onto that path.

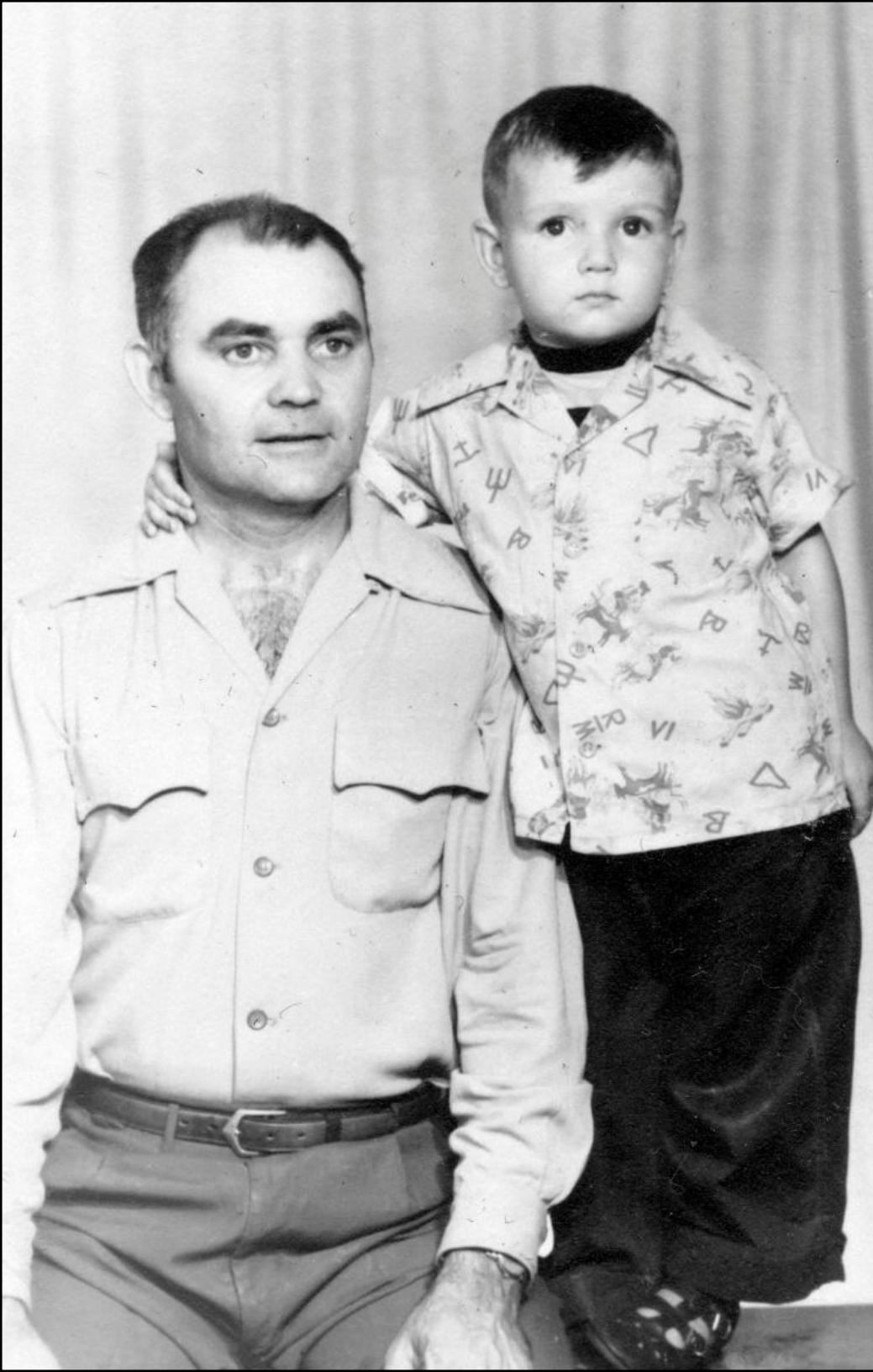
Dad couldn't continue to pay tuition and room and board for Mary, so he moved the family to Athens in 1950, after her first semester at Concord.

Our first years there were in a rented home, the Holroyd House on State Street. It was a great place for my first memories of Athens.

Thelma followed Mary at Concord, then Nancy and Martha. Mom was able to attend college, too! She was the last of "the girls" to graduate.

Then it was my turn. I followed in the shadows of the reputation left by my four sisters and mother. All six of us went on for Master's degrees and post graduate work. We all became teachers.





I learned to appreciate education mostly from the life, love and sacrifices of my dad, who had little opportunity to study, and from the role models provided by my sisters and mother. Dad taught by example how to embrace core beliefs and values, to focus on what is important, to take control of destiny, to work hard and persevere, and to get along. He respected life and the dignity of others, no matter what their circumstances. I learned that you don't have to talk to teach. Dad never talked about any of these principles.

The sacrifice Dad and Mom made to give their children an education wasn't clear to me all those years my mother repeated, "Oh, I remember when you said you weren't going to college."



At our last reunion before Nancy died, my sisters and I decided to return to McComas and my home town of Athens. We made that pilgrimage more than once.

Part Four GOING HOME

Can a person go home? My wife Jean, sister Martha, and I returned to McComas in 2008. Previously it hadn't occurred to me, though it is obvious now, that a business, including one that owned a town, would dispose of its assets and minimize losses after its holdings become unprofitable.



Photo: My grandfather and my mother's brother Raymond.



These images of McComas are as my parents would have remembered it. The photo of "main street" shown at the left was taken from the roof of the company store. My sisters, growing up, are in the top photos. Dad, with a friend, and a marching band, are below.

By the time Jean, Martha and I arrived on our road tour in 2008 there was little to show for what had been a thriving community.



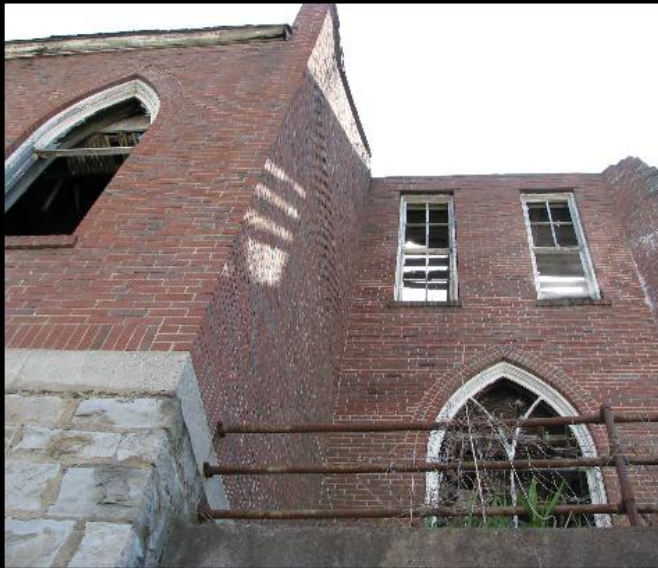
Reclamation of the mountains and coal-producing sites had been underway for years before our visit. The houses, schools, company store, family-owned businesses, and even many of the roads were gone.



More sturdy buildings, such as this electrical shop built by Italian stone masons, were still standing and were found a short hike into parts of the mountains still untouched by reclamation.



The interior revealed what used to be exquisite architectural detail in windows, doors and finishes that my dad would have undoubtedly appreciated.



We found what remained of the church my
parents and sisters attended in
McComas. Martha told me that Mom
performed in Christmas plays here. She
remembered as a little girl when the
family gathered with others for Sunday
morning services. This was also the place
for funerals of loved ones and neighbors
who died in mining accidents, collapses
and explosions.





Inside, there was a hint of the original beauty in design and construction, even as the building became dangerously close to total collapse.



The ride from McComas to Athens doesn't take very long.

I have returned to Athens many times since leaving in 1968. Of course it isn't the same. Even friends who continue to live in Athens see and feel the change. I expect this is true for other generations growing up and growing older in different places. Nothing ever stays the same. That's good in many respects, but demolition of favorite places and the almost startling juxtaposition of old and new businesses helped me better appreciate those Norman Rockwell days.





I expect no one was surprised to see Roy Beckett's old Gulf service station disappear after his death.



And soon to follow was the old Massie Hotel, where the Beckett's lived, and the P.W. Massie place, which we knew as the Beckett Brothers Maytag Store.



Large and beautiful Victorian-era homes such as the Butler's which stood at this site on State Street were moved out of the way or demolished.



Their green spaces and trees, including this majestic oak in the Butler's front yard known informally as the "Glory of Athens," had to go to make room for new construction.



The original Bank of Athens building gave way to a more modern facility, while across the street the old A.T. Maupin Store, Parker Brothers Hardware as we knew it, had outlived its usefulness.



The Bradley home, with stained glass windows and porch overlooking Vermillion Street, was demolished. The family's adjoining drugstore, where our hot lunches were made, and the Athens Theatre shown here wait their turn.



I was sorry to see the Athens Market go. It was here that David and I returned pop bottles for 2-cent refunds and delivered groceries for Homer and Jimmy Ball.



We mowed the lawn on the east side of the building, where the Athens Post Office is now located.



The Athens Theatre, which opened in 1947, was torn down. This is where several of my friends and I enjoyed working in high school and college.



The marque is about all that remains of the place where we made popcorn, sold concessions, cleaned and operated carbon-arc projectors.



Favorite Concord buildings had a similar fate. Demolished to make room for University Point was the gymnasium where David and I watched basketball games from the balcony when we were still in elementary school. Later we took physical education classes and watched our college classmates play home games here.



The swimming pool, shown below, was open to town kids during the summer months, from 1 - 2:15 p.m. During our younger years much of our activity centered around that opportunity.

The residence hall (next page) that first welcomed my sister Mary and provided a majestic porch for countless suitors to wait for their dates, including me, was destroyed.





Looking back over those formative years I realize that none of our parents thought that it "takes a village to raise a child." To the contrary, they understood their specific responsibilities for the most important aspects in life, especially raising their children. They had deep-seated values and shared a collective, intuitive sense of how to prioritize around families, form communities, and support each other.

But certainly the village, Athens, influenced and helped shape our lives. Reconnecting with childhood and high school friends helped reinforce for us the important role parents and community played in making us who we are.

Things and people pass away.
Sometimes it's hard to go home to face
all the change. But for many of us who
have moved away and others who
have remained or returned to Athens,
we recognize that our lives are better
than those of our parents.

In reconnecting, my friends and I
remember Athens as we knew it, and
parents who quietly sacrificed to make
their children's lives better than their
own. Our parents held us accountable,
teaching by example moral and ethical
principles that governed their lives,
and now govern ours. We knew what
was expected and acceptable, and
most of the time we stayed within the
parameters. And most of the time we
still do.





My friends and I shared in Athens experiences at a time very different from now. Our growing up, going to school, laughing, crying, dating, loving, parting, and in some cases returning has helped shape us. For me, going home, thinking about the past, reconnecting with my best friends from childhood, high school and college, and coming to terms with change has helped me better understand that the Athens we knew played an important part in making me who I am. That is true for all of us. We are, after all, who we are. There's nothing to prove or impressions to make. I know that my Athens friends and experiences contributed to making me who I am. I am who I am. For that I am most grateful.

Acknowledgements

Several photographs were contributed and
used with permission.

The CKB Collection, pages 57-59, 61-62, and 65

Andrew Turnbull, pages 56 and 60

Mary (Bowling) Graybeal, pages 22-23 and 25

Phyllis (Mays) Keatley, pages 19 and 21

The aerial photographs were from Microsoft Bing Maps

*Special thanks to those who reviewed early drafts and
provided helpful suggestions.*