

# Requiem for the Mountain People

By Lynn Coffey



*“Cousins” l/r: Frances Cash, Owen, Jimmy Campbell, Mary Cash, May Bell Campbell*

In the southern highlands of Virginia, the descendants of the native mountain people continue to live where their ancestors have lived for hundreds of years. Although many now have the amenities of basic living, such as electricity, telephones, and indoor plumbing, these hearty Appalachian folk can still remember what life was like before such luxuries.

They grew up in small hamlets like White Rock, Montebello, Chicken Holler and Love. Living in multigenerational cabins that had little in the way of modern conveniences, each tiny community was a self-contained unit that served the people living in and around its boundaries. In earlier years, many did not have vehicles and relied on foot power or horses to take them where they wanted to go. I once talked to a man who thought nothing of walking twenty miles to attend a Saturday night dance in another area.

Each community had its own church, school, blacksmith shop, gristmill, and general store where one could buy necessities such as coffee, sugar, and baking powder. These rugged, self-sufficient individuals didn't need much in the way of store-bought items; they grew and raised what was needed for everyday life in the isolated mountain regions they called home.

These native highland people aren't anything like the stereotype hillbilly image the media makes them out to be. I was told before moving here that they would not accept “outsiders” and were wary and clannish. Living among them, I've found the people of the Blue Ridge to be humble,

kind, resourceful, loyal, giving, truthful and wise. But they are a private people and one must respect their privacy.

Of all the mountain people I've had the privilege of knowing, there were five that stood out from all the rest. These five were different in that they chose to live the same austere lifestyle their parents and grandparents lived before them even though the world and all its modernization was staring them in the face. Owen Garfield, May Bell and James Napoleon "Jimmy" Campbell were the three unmarried siblings of Matthew Owen and Annie Loh Cash Campbell who lived on a 300-acre mountain farm under the shadow of Spy Rock. Without any modern conveniences, these three eked out a living in their isolated hollow, cultivating their garden plots with horses, cutting wood for their heating and cook stoves, keeping cows, hogs and chickens for their milk, meat and eggs. They lived a sustainable lifestyle before the phrase was coined.



*Owen, May Bell and Jimmy Campbell at their homeplace*

Their first cousins, Willie Frances and Mary Jane Cash, lived one ridge away on the backside of Crabtree Falls in a place aptly named "Cashtown" which was seven miles from the nearest country store in Montebello. The sisters, two of ten children born to Cyrus Gordon and Judith Frances Campbell Cash, lived their whole lives unmarried just like their Campbell cousins and were the toughest women I've ever known. At ninety years of age, Frances was still chopping wood for the cookstove and wood heater with a maul, metal wedges and her trusty double-sided axe.

All five were members of Mount Paran Baptist Church where my husband Billy was the pastor. Each year they walked out and attended the August homecoming service and the nightly revival services that followed. They all loved Billy and called him "My Preacher." And it always tickled me that, although they knew my name, they always referred to me as "The Preacher's Woman."



In the 42 years I have lived among them, the mountain people and their seclusive way of life have taken up permanent residence in my heart and etched unforgettable memories that have taken root, never to be forgotten. I'd like to share my friendship with these five rugged individuals as a way of keeping their memories alive so the younger generation will know what life was like before today's technology took over their world.

Frances was delivered into this world by her paternal grandmother, Lydia Campbell Cash, on February 26, 1930. Mary came on September 29, 1941 and was the only child of the ten delivered by Gracie Cash, a neighbor. The family raised their ten children in an abandoned schoolhouse they converted into a home, seven miles from the nearest country store. They lived secluded lives in an isolated mountain hollow and kept mostly to themselves. Frances said as children, they didn't get much education. I never realized she and her sister could not read or write until I interviewed them

*Mary and Frances Cash working on their woodpile* for the book, *Appalachian Heart*. The closest school was across a steep ridge on Nettle Mountain and Frances said she only went to the third grade because, "In the wintertime, it was just too hard on me. It took so long to thaw out my feet in front of the woodstove once I got there." I, imagining she had to take off her sox and shoes, asked if they were dry enough to wear back home that afternoon. Her answer floored me; "I didn't have any shoes. I walked to school in my bare feet." Incredulously, I volunteered that I heard of people wrapping their feet in rags, tying them on with baling twine. Once again, I was shocked by Frances' reply, "Honey, we were so poor we didn't have rags."

And although they didn't have any formal schooling, from the time they turned eighteen they never missed the opportunity to vote in every Presidential election. If the sisters didn't have education, they had grit. Frances worked each fall in local apple orchards, helping to pick that year's crop destined for far off places. She was thin and wiry and didn't mind climbing up the ladder to the very top of the trees which were much taller than the newer dwarf varieties. Mary, the shyer of the two, tended to stay home and help her mother around the house. The two walked

the seven miles out to the nearest country store and carried their purchases back home in a feed sack slung over their shoulders.

Winters were harsh and snowfalls were deep. Frances told stories that seem unbelievable, except for the fact we know they were true. Many days she and Mary shoveled their way out to the “main road” (a rocky, dirt path, really) with nothing but farm shovels, taking two full days to cover a distance of about four miles. Frances said, “We would shovel until about one o'clock in the morning and come home bone tired, only to start again the next morning.” At the time, Frances would have been about sixty years old, Mary, forty-nine.

Their father, Cyrus, was adept at making white oak baskets and taught Mary the craft. I asked Frances if she learned to make baskets and she replied, “No, I was too busy timbering!” Frances knew how to handle a chainsaw and cut locust fencing posts for local farmers. She cut trees and wielded her trusty two-sided axe to cut smaller pieces of wood used for heating and the cookstove.



*One of the handmade generational white oak baskets wove by Cyrus Cash*

In the early 1990s the Grant family of Montebello moved the sisters out of their Cashtown home, into a little cottage a few miles closer to the country store. Although the home had electric and was equipped with a kitchen stove and refrigerator, they continued to use their wood cookstove and the last time I saw the refrigerator, they had hauled it out on the front porch and kept their dry dog and cat food inside, so the bears wouldn't get at it!

Many mistook the sisters for men because they always wore their brother Dutch's clothing; jeans, oversize flannel shirts, men's jackets, ball caps and lace up boots. Even in the hot summer months, that was their standard outfit. Each August, when attending Mount Paran Church's annual homecoming service, they did wear different jackets and blazers with women's small red hats, possibly that once belonged to their mother.



*Mary and Frances with preacher Billy Coffey at Mt. Paran Homecoming*

Although they didn't have access to indoor plumbing, Frances and Mary never had an offensive odor about them. To me they always smelled of wood smoke. After a visit and hugs goodbye, their smoky fragrance always permeated my own clothing when I got in the car and drove home. It was always a comfort to me; a lingering presence that reminded me of them.

One time we took the sisters back to their homeplace in the dead of winter, making the long walk down the mountain together. I took photos of them at various outbuildings and at their grandparent's old log home. These two women were like a bunch of mountain goats, flitting from one steep place to another, never seemingly to tire. I told my husband that on the way back out, he needed to lead the pack and stop to ask the sisters questions so I could catch my breath!

The most humorous memory I recall was the time I was delivering the Backroads to the Montebello Country Store and found the sisters sitting on a large stack of cat food, sipping on cold Mountain Dew's. I asked if they wanted a ride home and they had to quietly confer amongst themselves as to whether they would ride or walk the two-miles home. In the end they opted for the ride. It was a hot summer day and I was driving a 1968 Ford Fairlane convertible with the top down. After loading all the bags of cat food in the car's spacious trunk, the sisters climbed in the back seat together. I will never forget looking in the rear-view mirror and seeing their long gray hair blowing wildly in the breeze and Frances saying, "Lynn, I don't think I ever saw a car that didn't have a top." I didn't even *try* to explain how the convertible worked!



*The Cash family homeplace in Cashtown*



*Sisters at grandparent's cabin*



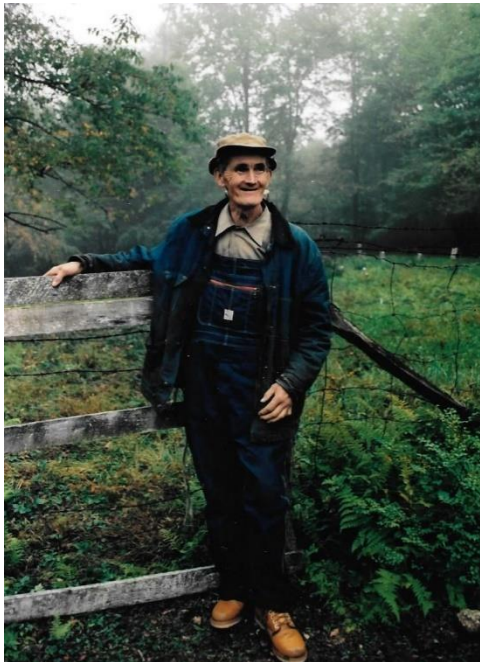
*The Bingham Mays family. The sister's grandmother Lydia on left*



*Cash grandparents; Stanley and Lydia Cash in later years*

I met the Campbells one by one, with Owen being the first. I was writing a story about the fish hatchery in Montebello and was taking photos of the men who worked there. Owen, who had walked out that day, was standing off to the side and the men told him to come over to be in the picture. I was completely fascinated by him. Tall and thin, wearing bib overalls, worn boots, and a denim jacket, his outfit was topped off with a faded Carhartt hat with ear flaps. He was sporting a toothless grin that lit up his face and he talked in a high-pitched voice that went up several octaves when he got excited. The deep creases around his kind eyes told of years of humor and gentle disposition for which he was known. Though he was humble and meek, Owen was also quite social in that he could talk to anyone about everything and did so with gusto.

He was the eldest of Matthew and Annie Cash Campbell's three children, born on June 16, 1923, at the foot of the mountain near Piney River. In the early 1940s, his parents purchased about 300 acres known as the Averill Campbell place, in the shadow of Spy Rock. Billy and I came to know this homeplace well when he became pastor of Mount Paran and we visited the Campbells often.



*Owen standing at the family cemetery*

A visit the Campbells after dark was not recommended because May Bell was a crack shot with her rifle and if she heard a noise outside she couldn't readily identify, she would shoot first and ask questions later!

Like all the mountain women, May Bell always wore an apron over her dress and the apron had an abundance of safety pins on it. The pins weren't holding anything together ...they were just hanging there. When asked what their purpose was, May Bell looked at me

As a young man, Owen worked with his daddy, cutting extract wood with crosscut saws. He was raised to get up early to do chores, such as feeding and watering his horse which he used to plow the garden. He could cook a little, making a pone of cornbread whenever he took a notion. He could play a little guitar. He had a strong faith and was not shy about telling others about God's love. Owen never married but he loved little children, often talking to them at their level in a little childlike voice.

Owen's sister, May Bell, (Oct. 27, 1926) was as interesting as he was. Tiny in stature but large in personality, May Bell was a wonder. Keeping house and cooking meals for her brothers was a full-time job but she also worked alongside them doing the many chores their family needed to survive. She milked her Jersey cow, "Fluff" each day and put the fresh milk in the springhouse.



*May Bell with her Jersey cow, "Fluff"*



*May Bell and her multitude of safety pins*



*Jimmy Campbell at his homeplace*

as though I was a complete ignoramus and replied, “Because you never know when you’re going to need a safety pin.”

One of the most humorous stories I’ve heard about May Bell was the time she told someone that a skunk had gotten inside the home. This home had a lot of holes where a skunk could enter. The lady asked what she did and May Bell said, “I got a broom and beat it until it finally went out the same hole in came in at.” At this revelation, the lady then asked if the skunk had sprayed? May Bell replied, “Not too bad!”

Jimmy, the baby of the family, (Mar. 2, 1931) was not as outgoing as his brother, but just as colorful. My first introduction to him came at the end of a shotgun! I had blocked the road up to their house with my truck after someone told me I could park there because they had no vehicles. I hadn’t counted on a neighbor bringing Jimmy and many bags of feed back home that day. Walking down to my truck, I encountered a man aiming a gun at me, fussing at my lack of consideration of where to park. But later, I was forgiven and I found James Napoleon Campbell had a tender heart under all that fuss. He once took out his wallet and showed me a picture of a woman and a little boy. The photo was yellow with age and frayed around the edges from use. He asked me, “Do you know who they are?” I didn’t know them, but said the child was the most beautiful little boy I had ever seen. “That’s me and my mother. I wouldn’t take a million dollars for that picture!” I often wondered what became of that treasured photo after Jimmy’s death.

Like their Cash cousins, none of the Campbells drove a vehicle, preferring to walk the mountains they knew like the back of their hands. But as the siblings were getting older, the insightful people of Montebello decided they needed a phone so if an emergency occurred, they could call out for help. This proved to be a real obstacle for the phone company

since the land into the Campbell’s homeplace was nothing but rocks. No problem. The telephone lines were simply strung through the trees the entire two-mile distance to their home. They were so proud of the new device that the first time I visited after the phone was installed, I asked where it was. May Bell pointed to a large empty boot box, saying, “We put it inside to keep it clean.”



*The Campbell siblings: Owen, May Bell and Jimmy*



*The Campbell homeplace under the shadow of Spy Rock*

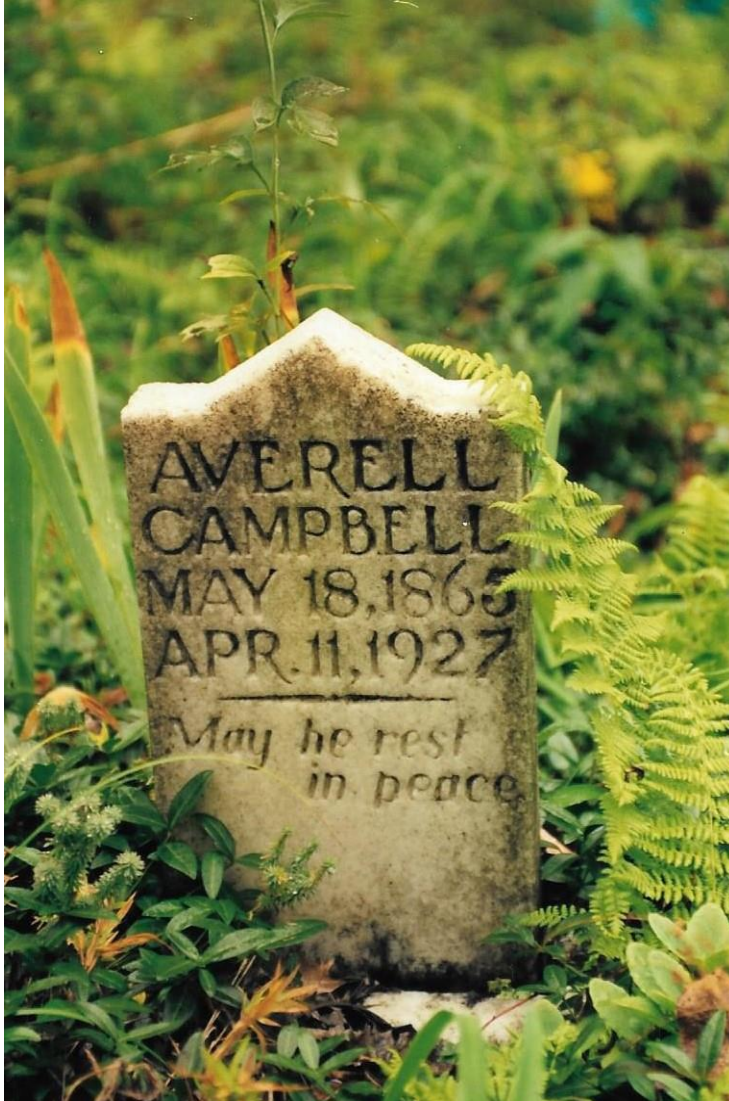


*The cousins the day we took them for a visit: Frances, May Bell & Mary*

One day while at the sister's house, they commented they had not seen their cousins for over a decade because they could no longer make the steep climb up to the Campbell's house. We told them we would take them for a visit and we all piled in the front seat of our truck and made the arduous trip up the mountain. To tell how bad the "road" was, the two mile trip took forty-five minutes in a 4-wheel drive truck! Once there, the reunion commenced with all five cousins talking at once, increasing in volume the entire afternoon. Billy and I sat in the middle, our heads bobbing back and forth, much like we were watching a ping-pong match. How they understood what the other was saying is beyond me but they all said at the end of the day they had a great visit!



*At the top of the mountain, looking down on the Campbell homeplace*



*The “Nettlefield” graveyard on the Campbell property*

With the deaths of these five mountain cousins, came the death of a way of life that will never again be replicated. Years ago, I came across an old Russian proverb said it best: “You live as long as you are remembered.” I’ve written these memories so some portion of their exceptional lives will remain now that they’re gone.

As time passed, Owen, May Bell and Jimmy became increasingly disabled. One by one they left the earth and were buried side by side in the ethereal “Nettlefield” family graveyard at the top of the mountain that overlooked the Campbell homeplace. Owen was the first. He died on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, 2014 at 90 years of age. When Owen left this world, bound for the eternal heaven he believed in, he had little in the way of personal possessions: a shotgun, a bed, and a small shaving mirror. But what he lacked in material goods, he made up for in a rich legacy of living. His sister May Bell was next, passing on September 9, 2014, just eight months after Owen. She was 87 years of age. Jimmy died on January 9, 2015, one year after his older brother, at 83 years.

The Cash sisters followed. Mary passed on December 27, 2021. Frances was next on August 12, 2022. They lived and worked side by side, doing things together as a team their whole lives. It was only fitting they were buried in the same way; side by side in the Mt. Paran Church cemetery.