

John Massie Coffey



One of the first people I met here on the mountain, before I even moved here, was John Massie Coffey and his wife Nin. The Coffeys had the first right of refusal on the piece of land my family was interested in buying that adjoined their property. Once they were sure we weren't a wild bunch, prone to throwing loud parties and having questionable habits they let us purchase the acre and a half just down through the woods from their house. It turned out to be one of the best decisions on both of our parts. Johnny and Nin became the closest mountain elders I had contact with in the years we were neighbors and the ones who taught me the most about living an Appalachian lifestyle. They became friends. They became family. They became my whole world here in Love, Virginia. This is their story...

John Massie Coffey (“Johnny” to me) was born March 10, 1896, the son of Henry Thomas and Nancy Jane “Nannie” Campbell Coffey. Their farm was at the end of Chicken Holler in Nelson County. Johnny, his brother, Forest, and sister, Mary, grew up surrounded by relatives.

Chicken Holler is just across the ridge from the community of Love. If you were to follow the narrow dirt road deep into the heart of the mountain, you’d come to homesteads once owned by the Everitt, Demastus and Coffey families. The old wagon road abruptly ends in about a mile and a half and one must turn around to come back out. The road stops at the property where Johnny, his father, Tom, and his grandfather, Edmund, lived. A large outcropping of rocks hung precariously off the side of the mountain to the rear of the property, overlooking the Tye River and the remote community of White Rock, far below. The site was called Squarmouth Rocks and the name was derived from a small cave with a square opening that was thought to be inhabited by early Indians. The only way to get to the small cave was through the land the Coffey’s owned, either from the top or up a steep trail from White Rock at the bottom. People who lived in the

Holler rode their horses down this path to Hercy Coffey's gristmill, where they had their corn ground into meal.

In the years I knew Johnny, he shared many memories of his early life in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. One of them he related to me was of his mother cooking in the stone fireplace of their one-room cabin made from American chestnut logs.

"She would make the most delicious bread in her cast iron Dutch oven. She'd work the dough into bread, and put it in the pan, and pile ashes around the bottom and on top of the lid, and let it bake until it was done. She did that with all the food we ate. Us children worked right along with our parents to put food on the table.

"Our cabin had only one room with no upstairs. We had two old wooden bedsteads to sleep in, and they took up most of the room. Us smaller kids slept in what they called trundle beds, which were kept underneath the other beds during the day and then pulled out at night. Mama made homemade quilts to keep us warm. The cabin wasn't too cold in the wintertime, but it was hot in the summer. It had two doors but no windows at all.

"When a couple got married back then, they would usually stay with either one of the parents for a while until they could save up to build their own place. Then we'd have a cabin raising. All the neighbors would turn out to help build the couple a new home. There were special men called "corner raisers" who stood on the house and saw to it the notches of the logs were made perfect so they could just roll them into place. Not everyone could do it right. Four of the best men who could do it were Gordon Everitt, Uncle Luke Demastus, Jesse Demastus, and our father, Tom Coffey. We all pitched in together and that way we got more done.

"We worked hard but there was time for fun, too. When we were about seventeen years old, the game of baseball was becoming really popular. The sport came closer and closer to us until the different areas began forming their own teams and playing one another in tournaments. The team from White Rock was already up and going when they started looking for a place level enough to play ball on. My father donated a large flat piece of land near Squarmouth Rocks as a ball field, and I guess they were grateful because they asked Forest and me to play on their team. We learnt the game well, and soon our team was playing all the teams from surrounding areas. My father played in all the practice games up at the ball field, as we called it, and it was a great enjoyment to him. Once, he got so wrapped up in the game that a man came to tell him the cows were in the garden eating his corn and my father just smiled and said, "Just play ball, boys!"

"We fellas from the White Rock team were getting better and better, until one day, we were scheduled to play the boys from Montebello. Now Montebello had the best team around these parts and we were a little afraid of them. But we went over there and played Irish Creek first and won 17 to 5. Later that afternoon, we played Montebello. The captain of their team was Will Harvey, and he told us, "You might have beat Irish Creek but you can't do these old boys thataway." The captain of our team, Holloway Coffey, told us, "Just do your best, boys."

"Well, sir, we went on to beat them 3 to 1 that afternoon! It was way down in the fall of the year, and people had their coats on, you know? When we beat them, everyone started jumping up and down so high that their coats were flapping over their heads. The Montebello team swore they'd never play us again, and do you know, they never did.

"I was the pitcher in that game and Hercy Coffey was the catcher. We made quite a pair, he and I. I had this curve ball that no one could seem to touch. Will Harvey asked Ashby Robertson,

who was the best player on the Montebello team, why he wasn't hitting the ball. I remember Ashby yelling back, "How can I hit it when I can't even see it?"

"Hercy and I practiced nearly every day, and we soon got so good that a scout came from the Washington, DC, area and tried to recruit us for the big leagues. We ended up deciding against going, but years later, more than once when I was out hoeing in the cornfield, I thought about how it would have been if I had gone to play baseball for the Washington Senators. So, you see, along with all the hard work, we had a lot of fun, too. But work we did.

"We would cut oak wood and strip off the bark, and let it season and dry in order to sell it for tanbark. When it was ready, we'd put huge loads of it on a wagon and haul it down to Lyndhurst to load it on the train. We could get one cord of wood on a wagon, and it weighed about 2,300 pounds. After leaving the Holler, we hauled it with oxen up to Mountain Top Christian Church, where we'd leave it overnight. It would take us all day long just to make it that far. In the morning, we'd start out again and drive the oxen all day in order to reach Lyndhurst. Then we'd unload the tanbark by hand, and when we finished, we'd drive the oxen back home. It took us about two and a half days to finish the job, and then we'd divide the four dollars we got paid amongst ourselves.

"Another job we had was common labor. Forest and I would get up and ride our horses over to Montebello to work ten hours digging ditches or laying rock along the road. Sometimes the temperature would be way below zero and our fingers and toes would get numb. Once we went to eat our dinner and found it was frozen solid. We did this work for a dollar and thirty-five cents a day and complained because we could only get two days of work a week because we needed the money. Yes, son, people nowadays don't know nothing!

"It was right about this time that Forest decided to marry Eva Campbell, who was born and raised in Love. Eva was sixteen years old and Forest was eighteen when they were wed in the Mountain Top Church in 1916. The old log church was located down Campbell's Mountain Road and was used until around 1921, when the congregation built a newer church at the top of the mountain where it now stands.

"Forest and Eva lived with our parents in Chicken Holler about three years before buying their own place about two miles away. Earlier, our parents had built a larger cabin, which replaced the

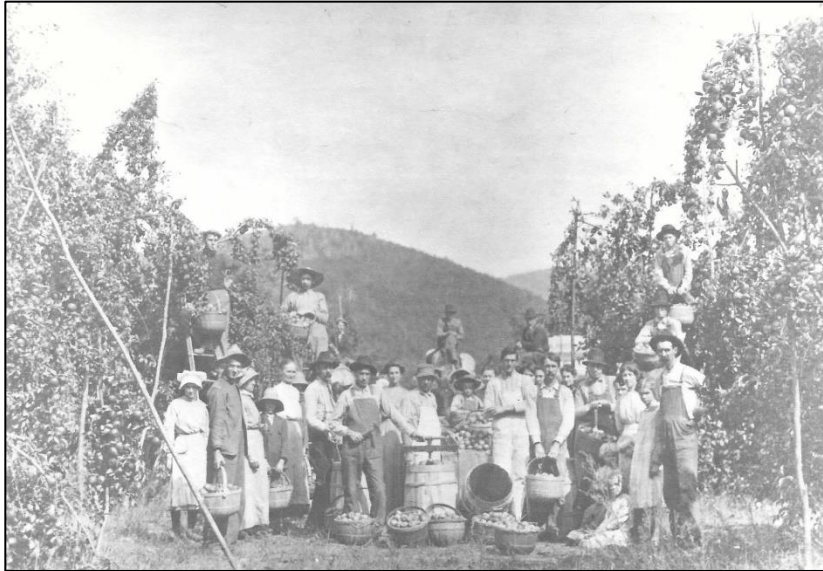


one-room log home they started out in. I followed suit and married Ninnie Virginia Coffey on July 3, 1917. Nin was a close neighbor to Eva over in Love. She was born on December 19, 1898, the daughter of Cyrus and Eliza Coffey. After we were married, we lived with my parents along with Forest and Eva in the same house and we all worked together with a minimum of fuss and helped each other along the way"

1963, Gladys & H. O. Engleman who bought the Coffey property

Johnny and Nin later moved into the vacant one-room log cabin of their parents and had two sons, Malcolm and Winfred, who were raised there. In the early 1930s, Johnny, who had up to

that time cut timber and done common labor, began working in apples. His first job was at Homer Clark's orchard in Massie's Mill. Back then, they hauled the apples with teams of horses hooked up to large wagons. The fruit was all picked by hand and brought back to small tables set up in the field. There were no packing sheds at that time. After the apples were sorted, Johnny would load the fruit in wooden barrels, twenty-five barrels to a wagon, and drive them to shipman, where they would be put on the Southern Railroad and shipped to their destination.



Early apple picking at the Hewitt farm in Sherando

to Rose Cliff Orchard in Waynesboro. Until he saved enough money for a car, Johnny stayed at the orchard in a worker camp provided by the owner. Once he obtained a vehicle of his own, he drove back and forth from home each day. He worked at Rose Cliff until 1939, when it closed.

By this time, Johnny had bought a 1934 half-ton Ford truck and had become an independent crew foreman for the fall apple harvest. He picked up workers and took them back home each evening. Tucker Snead said it best when he stated, "When Johnny started that truck at the top of the mountain, everything from there to Sherando would climb on!"

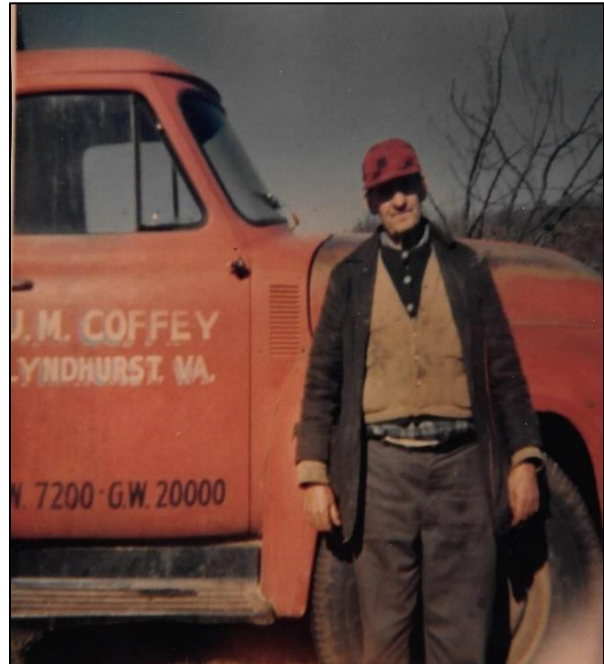
In 1947, Johnny bought a larger truck, and in 1949, he purchased a two-ton V-8 Ford. This was the big red truck that everyone remembers best. My husband Billy, who was born and raised back in Chicken Holler, said he can still remember being a child and hearing the sound of Johnny's truck coming up the mountain, wooden racks clacking back and forth and Billy's uncle Royal's three dogs barking and chasing the truck up the road.

Johnny kept a time log for each of the thirty or forty people who worked for him and also for the crew of ten men who helped him prune trees after the harvest was over. He said when they got to the orchards, they would spot pick, which consisted of picking the first ripe fruit. Each worker would pick between thirty to thirty-five bushels a day. Later, when the majority of the apples ripened, each person could pick sixty bushels a day. A whole crew together might pick upwards of two thousand bushels of apples a day at the various orchards. The picking season lasted from around Labor Day to the end of November and that included two pickings off of each tree.

Apples weren't the only things Johnny hauled for Homer Clark. He and his crew members dug rocks out of the ground, put them on wagons, and took them to the top of a mountain where Mr. Clark was building a stone house for his family. Johnny said it took three separate teams a week to get enough rocks for the house, and they dug the basement with a horse-operated shovel. He ended up working for Clark for three years before moving on



The 1947 Ford truck he hauled crew members on



Johnny's distinctive two-ton 1949 red truck

Many of the common apples at the time are now considered heirloom varieties. I had never heard names such as Red June, Parmine, Tall Sweetning, Fallow Waters, Jeanette, Limbertwig, Sheep Nose, and Johnny's personal favorite, the Black Twig. In fact, one crisp autumn day, we took Johnny on a ride to the former orchards where he had worked. He asked if I'd walk into Elm Spring Orchard and ask for a man by the name of John Hanna Morris. "Tell him there's a man in the car that wants to speak to him and that he wants a Black Twig apple," instructed Johnny. I dutifully did what he asked, and when I said the man outside asked specifically for a Black Twig, Mr. Morris' face took on a look of recognition before asking, "Would that man in the car be Johnny Coffey?" Needless to say, a happy reunion took place in the parking lot that day.

Some of the other orchards Johnny worked at during the fifty odd years before he retired in 1979 were: Elm Spring, White Bridge, and Willamayne in Fishersville; Seaman-Jordan in Tyro; Hayden in Crozet; Buffalo Gap in Buffalo Gap; McCue Brothers and Brooklin in Afton; Clarewin in Greenwood; Fox Hill and Hillside in Staunton; and Martin in Middlebrook.

Around 1955, the Coffeys moved out of the Holler and rented the Snead place in Love. They lived in the old house until it fell into disrepair, later buying the property the home sat on plus the adjoining land. This included the acreage where the Snead School was located and the piece our family bought after Johnny relinquished the first right of refusal. A new house was built on the land, and this is where Johnny lived until the beginning of 1984.

In the winter months, Johnny would go back to working in timber, cutting extract wood (standing dead chestnut trees) from the surrounding forests. Also, for three or four years, the state contracted the job of snow removal to Johnny. His route ran from Love to Delphine Avenue in

Waynesboro, up the Howardsville Turnpike to the Blue Ridge Parkway, Reeds Gap, and back to Love. The snow was removed with a homemade wooden V-plow. The massive plow was about fourteen inches high with two oak boards mounted on top of one another. It was about fourteen feet in length with a wooden bar going across the middle to keep it from coming apart in heavy snows. Metal blades from a road grader were mounted on the bottom to throw the snow away from the road. It was attached by thick cables to either a truck or a team of horses or mules.

In years past, the winters in our area were much more severe and it was nothing for snow to be on the ground from the first storm in October until spring. A three-foot snow was not an uncommon occurrence here in Love. Before the oak plow was in use, men would get together and ride their horses and mules up and down the mountain, twenty at a time, to tamp down the snow. Or



The Coffey's house in Love

they would attach a log with grabs in the ends and pull it with an animal to clear a path. So, the huge wooden plow, although crude in nature, was better than anything they had had up to that point. Johnny attached the plow to the back of his 1941 ton and a half Ford truck. Later, he switched to a 1947 two-ton Ford, saying, "I've never drove anything but a Ford, son."

There were others on the mountain who helped Johnny during the winter months. Jake, Mac, and Ralph Hewitt, as well as Dewey Hite, rode with him on his route and helped load and unload the heavy plow. Ralph said he could remember, as a young boy, going with Johnny and just about freezing to death. There was never a workable heater in the truck, so an old kerosene lantern was lit and set on the floorboard. Ralph laughed at the memory of hunkering down by the lantern just to get a little warmth on his hands and coming back up with nothing but a black face from the soot. "Johnny just wasn't affected by the cold," said Ralph. "He'd just keep on going while I'd be nearly frozen through. I remember seeing him under the truck putting on chains, and when he climbed out, he was snow covered. He just shook off like an old horse and asked me if I was ready to go."

Johnny also did not put his trust in antifreeze, so every evening he'd drain the radiator and, in the morning, refill it. This method worked as long as the truck was running. One day, after he started off the mountain, he encountered Guy Hewitt coming up the road. He pulled the truck over to the side and helped Guy shovel a path so he could get by. When Johnny had finished, he couldn't get the truck started again. He let it roll down the mountain, and it finally started, but he only got as far as the Mount Torrey Furnace before it stopped. Johnny walked the two miles to his son Winfred's house where he spent the night before walking back to get the truck the next morning.

These are the memories of people who were well acquainted with the man named John Massie Coffey. I have my own memories, which I'll cherish forever. Such as, when I learned to split rounds of red oak with an eight-pound maul. I would go out early in the morning to split wood for a few hours and I could hear Johnny doing the same thing up through the woods at his house. I'd



Johnny strikes a classic pose

chop and then he'd chop, and soon we would get a good rhythm going back and forth. By the time we both finished, I was smiling so wide my face hurt. Then I'd walk up to his house and Nin would fix us both a cup of coffee. The way Nin drank her coffee always fascinated me until I realized a lot of the mountain people drank it that way. She'd pour herself a cup, stir in some cream and a good bit of sugar and then pour the coffee into the saucer. She'd blow on it and then drink the coffee from the saucer. When I asked why she did it that way she would reply, "it cools faster." I never tired of watching her do it but never developed the habit myself.

My daughter loved walking up to Johnny and Nin's house with me. Invariably when we came, they were having dinner and asked us to sit down and eat a bite. Nin always seemed to have an array of foodstuffs on the table and after our visit, walking back home, Heather would announce, "I love going to their house at dinner-time...it's like a smorgasbord!"

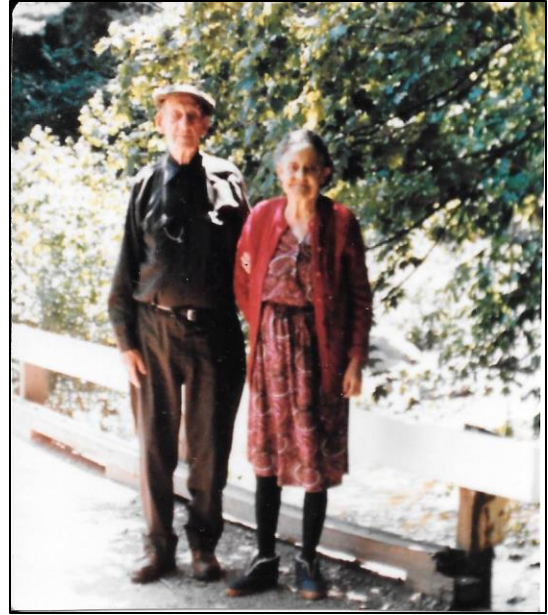
I remember one time I walked up to see them and the closer I got to the house I heard music. At first, I thought they had the radio on but as I peeped in the window, I saw Nin playing the old upright piano with wild abandon and Johnny standing next to her sawing a tune on his fiddle. I was smiling when I knocked on the door. The music stopped briefly as they let me in but continued as I urged them to keep playing. After the tune ended, I said it was one of the prettiest melodies I had ever heard and asked what the song was. "Why it's a little bit of Soldier's Joy," replied Johnny. When I told him, I had never heard the song before, Johnny was shocked and said, "Son, *everyone* knows Soldier's Joy!" After that day I never forgot the haunting melody that *everyone* knew.

One of the main things that stood out in my mind was the way Johnny called everyone "Son." The first time we met him, our six-year-old daughter had on bib overalls and a Dutch boy haircut. He patted her head and called her "son." I remarked that he must have thought Heather was a boy. The next time it happened, I was wearing bib overalls and he called *me* son. I speculated he had vision problems. But when he called his wife son, I was stumped. Later, I came to realize he used "son" as a term of endearment for anyone he came in contact with. I now find myself using the term "son" for the same reason.

The Coffey's were also the ones who introduced me to the North Fork of the Tye River. On July 4, 1981, we weren't doing anything special for the holiday so we asked if they would like to take a ride. They said yes and when asked where they wanted to go, they said down the North Fork via Montebello.

The trip down the North Fork is one I will always remember, as we wound our way down the narrow dirt road that paralleled the Tye River. I stopped to take a picture of them standing together when we got to the White Rock bridge. Johnny and Nin pointed out old homeplaces where people had lived many years prior. Through their eyes the various landmarks and people they talked about came alive and swept me back to a time I had never lived but felt a close kinship with.

Little did I realize that in December of that same year I would start a small newspaper called Backroads and the trip we took together that July 4th set the stage for many trips up and down the North Fork, interviewing the folks who lived there.



The Coffeys at White Rock bridge



Johnny and Nin's 64th wedding anniversary party at the Edelweiss Restaurant

On their 64th wedding anniversary Johnny and Nin were honored by their neighbors in Love with a dinner party at the Edelweiss Restaurant in Greenville. Nin was given a beautiful corsage and Johnny had a boutonniere pinned on his shirt collar. Nin told me this was the first time they had ever been to a "sit-down" restaurant and was thrilled when we told them they could order

anything they wanted from the menu and it would be paid for. The thirteen people that attended the party were; Boyd and Gladys Coffey, Jim and Vi Courtney and a friend of theirs, Sonny, Bunny, & Buddy Stein, Guy Hewitt, Steve Barrett and myself.



The Coffeys: 64 happy years together

the dough elastic. Cut out biscuits and put them in a round cake pan, sides touching. For hoecake, make two family-sized biscuits, bake for ten minutes at 450 degrees and enjoy with a meal or just by themselves!

Another activity we did with the Coffeys was take them grocery shopping once a week. By that time, Johnny was the one going into the store with Nin's list to purchase what they needed. Nin and I stayed in the car and talked. They liked to shop at the IGA in Waynesboro because they offered free coffee. My job was to get Nin a cup and fix it the way she liked while we sat in the car. The grocery shopping was a real experience because Johnny was what Nin called, a "comparative shopper." This meant that every single item had to be compared with others like it, picking the cheapest one. It took at least two or three cups of coffee and a lot of conversation before we saw him finally emerge from the front entrance. I heard many stories from Nin during those shopping days. Like how she walked the three miles out of Chicken Holler and up to Love to her parent's house with a sixty-gallon copper apple butter kettle on her head, balancing it by holding on to the kettle's handle. Nin couldn't have weighed ninety pounds soaking wet her whole life so this story totally amazed me. Or to use one of Johnny's famous quotes about how people don't work as hard today as they did back then, "Son, people nowadays don't know nothing!"

Another thing I enjoyed was coming to their house when Nin was making biscuits or hoecake. Hoecake for those who aren't familiar with the term, is a large family-sized biscuit that when baked you simply tore off what you wanted and smeared butter, jelly or apple butter in the middle.

I watched Nin at the kitchen table, making up a batch and noticed she didn't have a recipe. She mixed all the ingredients up in an aluminum wash pan and patted the dough out on a well-floured surface before cutting them. I finally asked how she made them and she told me her simple recipe that works every time, no matter who is making them. Three large handfuls of self-rising flour, three full fingers of lard or Crisco that is cut into the flour with a knife or your fingers, a pinch of salt, and enough buttermilk to make a gooey dough. Add more flour if the dough is too "sloppy." Turn the dough out on a floured surface and knead around 20 times, just enough to make

In November 1983, Nin had a bad cough that turned into pneumonia and she was hospitalized at Waynesboro Hospital. Her condition worsened and no one could visit except family members. I was beside myself with grief and somehow thought I had to get in to see her. So, I went and stood outside her room and looked in at the tiny frail woman positioned inside an oxygen tent. A nurse came by and asked if I was her granddaughter and I lied and said I was. She told me I could go in but not to stay long. I pulled up a chair next to the bed and reached under the tent for her hand and held it while I cried. I told her how much she meant to me.... how much I loved her. In a while the nurse came and signaled it was time to go. Reluctantly I said goodbye, squeezed her hand and said, "Nin, I'll see you in heaven." She returned the squeeze and I knew she had heard my words. The next day, on November 3rd, Nin quietly passed and she was buried in the little graveyard at the top of the mountain. Johnny grieved and decided he didn't want to stay in the house by himself so he began alternately living two months with each of his sons.

One day he called and asked if we would be interested in renting his house. We were renting another place down the mountain but we quickly said yes to his offer. He hung up satisfied, knowing someone who loved his house as much as he did would be living there. A few minutes later he called back and asked, "Would you be interested in *buying* my house?" I remember having to sit down at that point, stunned he'd want to sell it. He explained that without Nin, it just didn't feel right any more. The only thing that bothered him about selling his place, was that he wouldn't be able to come back home. But he explained if WE bought it, then he could. In January of 1984, we signed papers and became the new owners of the John Coffey property. Johnny was elated, saying now he wouldn't have to worry with mowing the grass, raking leaves, and general upkeep on the old house. We told him to keep his keys and for as long as he lived, we kept his bedroom intact and he came and went as he pleased. It was nothing for me to come home from delivering the Backroads newspapers and find Johnny in the kitchen frying up a skillet of potatoes.

One thing Johnny forgot to tell me before we bought his house was there was a "houseguest" in residence. We slept upstairs and the bathroom was down. One night, on a trip down the steps, I flipped on the hall light and there was a large black snake laying on the kitchen floor. He slithered off and couldn't be found. When I asked Johnny about it, he laughed and said the snake had been there a long time, was harmless, and he never could find his entrance hole. If it was any other woman, you'd probably still hear her screaming. But I was a Florida girl with lots of experience in my snake-ridden state so we called a truce...I would ignore the snake's presence if he kept the house free of mice. That worked for many years and for all I know, he may still be living there.

We left everything in the house as it was until the following autumn when Johnny decided to have an auction. I took a picture of him and his brother Forest sitting out in the front yard on the living room couch while the auction was going on and it still evokes a sadness in my heart whenever I see it; a man watching all his earthly possessions scattered to the wind. But by the next spring Johnny was ready for the garden to be plowed so he could start planting tomatoes.

Johnny was what you'd call a tomato plant aficionado, planting more than two hundred in his garden each year. He had a certain way of planting them to reap a vast crop of fruit when it came time to harvest. First, he'd dig a small hole in the soil and into that hole he'd put a shovel full of

aged cow manure he had bought from Robert Hartman, a dairy farmer who lived a few miles down the mountain. He then would pour two small pans of water into the manure and cover it with leftover soil. The tomatoes were then planted in the middle of these holes and 10-10-10 fertilizer was applied to the ground. He'd work in the fertilizer with a cultivating hoe worn thin from the rocky soil and then sit back and watch the 'maters grow. He was a firm believer in planting by the signs and always had a bountiful harvest to show for it. The yearly Farmer's Almanac was always close in hand, instructing when the best days to plant were. I got a lesson on how well planting by the signs worked from Johnny himself. A neighbor who didn't have a garden plot asked if he could have one end of Johnny's garden to plant a few rows of green beans. Johnny said he could and he came one day to do his planting. But I was instructed that it wasn't a good sign and we would wait until the following Tuesday before planting ours. The other man pooh-poohed Johnny's recommendation and was delighted when his beans came up with *lots* of bloom. Ours didn't have nearly as many and I asked about it. Johnny bent over and whispered, "He planted on a "posey day" ...all blooms but no fruit." Sure enough, the neighbor ended up with a scant harvest while our rows kept bearing until I finally ran out of quart canning jars.

By this time Johnny had planted over two hundred tomato plants and I knew that meant more canning. I told him, "Please do not bring anymore tomato plants up here!" All was quiet until one morning about five-thirty, I heard tires on our gravel driveway. Popping up from my bed I saw Johnny in his old '71 Ford truck, creeping down the drive. I watched from the open window as he slid out of the front seat with a newspaper wrapped parcel, heading for the



Lynn and Johnny, snapping a large pan of tenderettes

for the garden. I yelled out the window, "Hey, old man, those better not be any more tomato plants!" He looked up laughing and replied, "Son, you can never have too many tomato plants." That year I canned tomatoes, juice, catsup, and tomato sauce in abundance.

When he came to work the garden, he brought his own dinner, refusing my offer of a sandwich or bowl of soup. Every day was the same; a tin of sardines, an 8-pack of saltines, a can of Coke ("please put this in the icebox until lunchtime"), and a Peter/Paul Mounds candy bar for dessert. The menu never varied and we ate together on the picnic table under the shade of a huge oak tree.

Johnny once made a statement I never forgot. I took him to Twenty-Minute overlook on the Parkway and as we looked across a vista of never-ending forest, he said with a sweep of his hand,

“It’s hard to believe there were no trees here 75 years ago.” *What?* He told me when his people came here from Ireland, they girdled all the trees, eventually killing them, later planting Kentucky blue/grass on the land. “As far as the eye could see, there were sheep and cattle grazing, with only a few hammocks of shade trees for the animals.” Hard to believe but true. I saw a photo taken in the same area in the 1940s and sure enough, trees were sparse.



Johnny standing by the familiar yellow and white 1971 Ford truck

Another thing he taught me was how to make homemade sauerkraut in a crock. I am from German descent and sauerkraut was a staple at our table in my growing up years. One October he guided me through the process and I was amazed at how simple it was. Basically, all you needed was some heads of cabbage, salt, a crock, a kraut cutter, some type of wooden masher and a lot of elbow grease. He had all the tools needed there at the house and after everything was arranged under the old oak tree in the front yard, he sat in his red metal chair and barked instructions. After all the cabbage was tamped down and salted, he told me to go in the woods behind the house to get four wild grape leaves. These were deposited on top of the kraut and a clean plate was placed upside-down on top, submerging the cabbage under its juice. It was topped with a round wooden lid with a large clean rock on the lid. The crock was then placed in the crawl space under the house and left for 14 days. At the required time, I drug it out and called Johnny at his son’s house for further instructions. He told me to take the wooden lid off and when I did, I was appalled at the thick layer of mold on top. Yuck! These were the days before cell phones and I had to run back and forth to the house to talk. I told him the kraut was spoiled but he said to just reach under the grape leaves to remove the layer of mold and throw it away. Another trip to the phone and Johnny said to go out and plunge my hand down to the bottom of the crock and bring up a pinch to taste

it. *Ambrosia!* It was the best kraut I had ever eaten and I canned all ten gallons of it, once again filling all my quart jars to share with everybody I knew.

When Johnny offered me an apple (the mountain people offered apples to those visiting), he would take his pocket knife and peel the apple in one long rope while engaged in conversation. Never looking while he peeled, he had a perfectly unbroken rope of red skin when finished.

In appearance, Johnny was a tall man who always wore dark brown Dickie work pants and shirts. And even in the hot summer months he wore a pair of long waffle-weave underwear. I asked him once why he wore long underwear when it was so hot outside and he said, "To keep cool." Pressed further, he said the clothes made him sweat and the sweat evaporated against his skin, keeping him cool. He topped his head with a tweed golf cap and his feet wore a pair of work boots. I never saw him wearing glasses, even in his early nineties. And his hearing was spot on. He was fiercely independent and was sharp mentally until the day he died.

He died just a few months short of his 92nd birthday, on December 21, 1987, at his son's home. They planned on going Christmas shopping together and were halfway to the car when Malcomb forgot his list and told his dad to come back into the house until he could find it. Johnny sat in his favorite chair by the heater while Malcomb went upstairs for the list. When he came back down, he walked into the living room and realized his dad had slipped into eternity. When the call came, I was devastated. I remember thinking, he died just the way he lived; gently, without a lot of fuss.



Perhaps it was because I was so young when my own grandfather died, and I never had the privilege of having a relationship with him, that I became so attached to Johnny. All I knew was the man who had become my surrogate grandfather and trusted mentor was gone. Gone were the stories of an earlier era. Gone were the life lessons he imparted to me. And, in its place, a sadness that threatened to con-

Winfred & Mary, Malcomb & Rachel, Johnny & Nin Coffey sume me. I mourned when Nin died but Johnny's death affected me in a way I had never known. The family asked me to be a pallbearer along with the men of the community and it was an honor I will always cherish.

In the following days, I realized although his physical presence was no longer with me, my memories of him were tucked deep in my heart where I could pull them out at any given time and remember them. The way he stood up tall and erect at 90 years of age when I took his picture. His funny little high-pitched laugh. The way he always patted my hand when he talked. His quiet but powerful faith in God. And the way he always called me, "Son." Writing this article for the NCHS Backroads blog has helped rekindle those wonderful memories of a rugged mountain man I had grown to love; John Massie Coffey.