

## Afterword

In the years since my retirement, I've had a great deal of time to look back on the past eighty years. I've had an extraordinary life, going from a world of mule-drawn plows and wood-burning stoves to a world where I can speak those memories into a microphone and my home computer automatically converts them into typed text. In a way, even though I was born in 1935, the experiences of my life have spanned three centuries.

The communities of my childhood – Mill Creek, Jeffs Creek, and the rest – are very different today than they were in my early days. The mountains remain, eternal and familiar, and a few of my older relatives still live there, but the way of life I knew is gone. The population has decreased by 80 or 90 percent as so many young people over the years have moved away. People's interdependence with the land, which carried them through lean times so often, is mostly gone; food comes from the supermarket, and there's a bare dirt parking lot where my grandparents' huge vegetable garden used to be.

Coal mining, for so long a mainstay of the local economy, is dying too, as reserves are depleted and the big companies close up shop. Politicians rail about attacks on coal, but as far as I can tell coal mostly brought illness and danger to those mountains, and the profits never stayed in the mountains enough to do the people there much good. I wish there were more education available for mountain people about how to work together to establish local businesses, maybe through cooperative effort, so earnings could stay in the community, but that hasn't happened on any large scale. Between the rise of the cash-based economy and the loss of population, the cooperative spirit I remember as the backbone of the community seems to have faded. In this way, as in so many ways, the home of my childhood simply doesn't exist any longer.

Whenever I have visited there, I've ended up thinking about how I was able to get the education I did, which helped me build a life where I've learned so much I wouldn't have learned otherwise and been able to give my children opportunities they might never have had. Yes, I have worked hard, but then so many of my family and friends from back home worked hard, with nothing much to show for it at the end of their lives.

After growing up in a house whose only book was the Bible, I now live in a home full of books, and one of my greatest pleasures is knowing I can learn more about anything that interests me; history is my particular favorite. I've been inside the vast British Museum and seen the library at Ephesus in Turkey; I've sat under a banyan tree in Hawaii and seen glaciers in Alaska. How was I fortunate enough to get to this place?

Deep down, I believe I owe this life most to the many people who helped me over the years:

To my parents and extended family, who taught me both self-sufficiency and responsibility to others and who nurtured my self-esteem and optimistic spirit;

To my teachers, from the sisters at Middle Mill Creek School who stoked the woodstove while they taught me my ABCs to Mrs. Barnett at the Berea College Foundation School, who told me I could do anything I set my mind to and then allowed me to prove her right by letting me take high school courses in my second semester there;

To mentors like Perley Ayer, who entrusted me, a newly-unemployed and inexperienced young man, with a job at the Appalachian Volunteers;

To Tena, who not only loved me but always encouraged and challenged me and who helped me build the family that now brings me such happiness;

To my five wonderful children, Kevin, Reva, Valery, Robert and Steven, the raising of whom gave me so much pleasure and pride and whose friendship, as adults, I value so much, and to my nine grandchildren, who are the joy of my older years;

And even to near-strangers, from the Atlantic City restaurant owner who trusted me to run a tab for my breakfasts so that I wouldn't go hungry to the bank president in Danville who, nearly sight unseen, loaned me the money I needed to establish my business there.

As I look back on my life so far, I can only hope all the work I've been privileged to do through the years, empowering those I've worked with to improve their lives and their communities, has passed along enough of the many gifts I have been given.