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A Blackberry Day

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A Blackberry

It was a good summer for blackberries. They cascaded abundantly from thickets of vines in numerous patches on the Long farm, the 70-acre hillside of my birth and first eight childhood years. From New Martinsville in Wetzel County, two miles as the crow flies east of the Ohio River, a remote area along today's State Route 180 provided a plenteous picking of the wild, juicy fruit. Its beauty of ebony-purple glow attracted the attention of all eager pickers, of whom I was one in early childhood.

Our farm was a virtual blackberry paradise. The Bernan Hill, which identified the acreage to locals, was named after an itinerant frontiersman who cleared much of the hill for crops and livestock in the early 1800's. Brush was burned or discarded in the hollows at the edge of which grew the most luscious blackberries. Profuse vines or canes found their best habitat on the edges of these abandoned hollows, which drained the property. Coolness of the hollows and partial shade of oak, poplar, and ash trees created an environment where grew the largest, most moist, and sweetest mountain fruit.

On a mid-Depression June morning as fluffy clouds floated in an azure sky, such a blackberry scene awaited us. From the highest point of the Bernan Hill as the fog cleared from the low bottomland in the valley below, Mom and I started from the back door of the Long's Appalachian bungalow ready to pick berries. Dressed in at least two layers of trousers and long-sleeved shirts, mother and son ambled between small and simple farm buildings carrying berry-picking

paraphernalia. Two milk buckets were soon to become stained from ripe berries settling down into their sparkling cleanness.

Within each of the larger milk buckets was a smaller one-gallon container stained purple from many a blackberry-picking foray. In a former life it had served as a Karo container. In a feat of Appalachian ingenuity, the Karo can was morphed into a blackberry-picking pail by puncturing a small hole in each side near the top rim. A wire was threaded through the holes to form a carrier. Upon locating a choice blackberry area, the carrier was attached to the belt around the waist of the picker thus allowing both hands to pick simultaneously.

As if our multi-layered clothing were not enough, Mom insisted that we wear Dad's five-buckle boots. Sears and Roebuck called them Arc-tics, but in our mountain dialect we called them "five-buckle 'ardics.'" Thus, we trudged along with straw hat brims waving, shirts bulging, and "overhaul" pants tucked into our "five-buckle 'ardics.'" Mom would have hidden in the bushes beside the farm road had she met anyone from the valley below, especially her country school and church friends.

Our berry-picking equipment rattled while we shuffled along a farm road traveled mostly by horses pulling loads from Pleasant Valley below to the Long place above.

Finally after passing through a low stone wall, the botanic object of our extensive trek appeared unmistakably before us on the edge of a deep hollow. All along the parameter of the hollows, nature had propagated



Gertrude Furbee, our author's mother, with a milk pail used for blackberry picking.



Day

By Jack Furbee

a continuous mass of tangled blackberry vines covered by their leaves and fruit.

The clanging of our milk buckets with their picking pails inside was silenced suddenly as we stood in astonishment enthralled at the sight of varicolored shades of black and green glowing in the morning's brightness.

Mom approached the thicket with a determined stride, and said, "Jackie, bring the buckets." She was thrashing away at the vines with her feet protected by the "five-buckle 'ardics.'" Soon she had exposed a veritable wall of fruit dripping in clusters of ten-to-20-berry cones each. Everywhere! Above, below, left, and right vines hung heavily with well-ripened,

juicy bunches of black fruit ready to be picked.

Forgetting the overwhelming task ahead of her she exclaimed, "Oh! Jackie, this is the nicest patch of blackberries I have ever seen. Give me my picking pail." Taking the pail, she strapped the carrier to her belt. Mom beckoned me to come closer as she said excitedly, "Now stand still while I buckle your picking pail to your belt."

"There!" she said with finality and determination. "We are ready to pick berries."

Not nearly as skilled at the art of picking berries, I picked from the lower vines while she stretched to pick the more luscious fruit higher

up. Only a few minutes later, we couldn't resist a strong temptation which afflicts every berry picker. Our stained, sticky fingers picked a handful of the choicest fruit. After momentarily looking at one another somewhat sheepishly, eagerly we began munching on the black fruit of Appalachia with unmitigated delight. "Jackie, these are the sweetest berries Bernan Hill ever produced!" whispered my beautiful, mountain mother while removing her ragged straw hat, a sign of sheer joy as she relished the wild delight.

In about 30 minutes of steady picking, left and right hands working together in a synchronized motion, Mom filled her berry pail to



Author Jack Furbee as a boy in Wetzel County.



Jack with his parents, Clyde and Gertrude Furbee, in about 1938.

overflowing. My picking was not so productive since familiar surroundings distracted me. Glad to have my company in this remote corner of the farm, Mom tolerated lapses in attention to my work.

Finally, as the rays of the noon sun shone on our straw hats most directly and the afternoon sun began its journey down to the horizon, one after another the picking pails were emptied into the two milk buckets filling each to overflowing. Huddling reflectively over our fresh picking and somewhat tired, we were ready to go home when Mom endeavored to recover my attention. "Wait a minute; we are not finished. What about our picking pails? They are as empty as when we started!" Her admonition drew me back to picking berries until the job was done.

The hills in the west began to cast their earliest evening shadows. As the late afternoon sun hit our backs, we climbed the steep point to the Long house. Occasionally we stopped, gingerly setting our berry buckets on a rare level place to prevent spilling the objects of hard work, mostly on Mom's part. In the shade of a few large trees where the cattle lay munching their cuds and loitering to avoid the hot sun, one veteran blackberry maid and her novice son removed their straw hats one more time, breathed deeply, and enjoyed the cool breeze from Pleasant Valley below.

Arriving home, we placed the buckets of berries on the dirt floor of the cellar, a small dug-out area under part of the aging house. There the precious cache rested until the following day when our blackberry bounty was canned to preserve the fruit.



The Long house, home to our author's grandparents, where Jack Furbee spent his early years.

The next day while canning was in progress in an oppressively hot canning kitchen, Mom rolled out dough for a blackberry cobbler which she baked in the oven of the wood cooking stove. Zinc lids with glass linings tightened on rubber rings made the Mason jars ready for the hot water bath that sealed them. Twenty colorful quarts of canned berries were placed on shelves in the cellar to await opening in the winter. When the ground was frozen and the snow was deep, we relished the pies, cobblers, jelly, and jam causing us to forget blackberry-patch labor of June. Often on a very busy day like Monday washday, Mom served blackberries for dessert in well-worn dessert bowls. Cream and sugar made the berries a dish fit for royalty. Dad expectantly crushed the berries with his fork thus mixing the delicious juice with the cream and sugar. After having eaten most of the serving, he raised the bowl to his lips to relish every drop of the blackberry goodness.

After we moved from the hill in the 1940's, the area of childhood enchantment grew into a forest to be harvested many times for timber. Nevertheless, the dew still falls, the sun still rises, and the moon still sheds her light on what had once been a paradise of bounty for two happy blackberry pickers. 🍷

JACK FURBEE was born in Wetzel County in 1934. He holds a doctorate in education from West Virginia University and served 35 years as an educator, counselor, and administrator. He is professor emeritus at Olivet University in Bourbonnais, Illinois. His autobiography is titled *Growing Up Appalachian in the Van Camp Community of Wetzel County, West Virginia*. Jack's most recent contribution to GOLDENSEAL appeared in our Spring 2015 issue.