

# A Wood Gathering Day

Sent to

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## *Living Appalachian, a Website*

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Both current and vintage photography illustrate the story.

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In 2012 Dr. Furbee wrote a book entitled Growing Up Appalachian published by McClain Publishing in Parsons, West Virginia. It is temporarily out of print.

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The New Martinsville centennial parade of September 3, 1938, thrilled my family as we walked the streets of the city viewing the floats, bands, and especially the log cabin erected in front of the courthouse on Main Street. Presley Martin, the founder, plotted out the town naming it after himself, Martinsville; the new city was Martinsville, Virginia. In 1846 it became the county seat of Wetzel County having been formed from Tyler County. Finally it was incorporated in 1848. After celebrating the one hundredth



birthday of the county seat, we returned south across the Fishing Creek and along the Ohio River to our home in the Van Camp community about three miles south and east of New Martinsville. Dad parked his 1928 Ford at the foot of the ancestral Bernan Hill after which we walked the steep point to the Long house the home of my maternal grandparents. Dad spoke to his mules in the pasture as we climbed the hill. He frequently conversed with his delightful equestrian friends. From the conversation on that September afternoon I knew he would be working the mules soon.

Groundhogs had begun their hibernation; rabbits scampered toward their sage brush burrows having foraged on the hillside farm during the night. As bright sun broke through the morning mist, den trees came alive with activity as squirrels frisked about exercising themselves for another busy day. Like the woodwind section of an orchestra, their bass barking blended with a harmonious clarinet chorus of birds singing throughout the woodland hillside of the Long farm, a section of the original Van Camp property of pre Civil War days. Fall leaves glided lazily earthward on a rutted farm road which ran tortuously like a tattered ribbon around the middle of the hill overlooking Pleasant Valley. Soon this well worn pioneer road would be the path of a mule team and sled carrying father and son into the depth of the forest to cut wood for heating the Long house during the cold winter months.

Rising at daybreak, Dad had found his cherished mules grazing near the Little Barn below the house. Dutifully they followed him to their accustomed stalls in the crude

basement stable where they pulverized huge ears of corn having been placed in the feedboxes, part of the manger structure. Large mandibles ground the seasoned corn. Rhythmic munching and chewing were proof of a rare delight for Dad's mules. Their big lips and tongues, giving forth with copious saliva, vacuumed every grain of corn. Engrossed in their corn treat, they were unaware of their owner harnessing them for the day's labor. Fitting each with bridle, collar, back straps, belly bands, hames, traces, and bits, within a few minutes Dad expertly dressed the mules with every harness detail snapped, strapped, and buckled tightly for maximum horsepower.

On that chilly fall morning I awoke in my attic bedroom to Dad's voice in the wood yard below. "Whoa, Jack....Whoa, Jennie....Easy now," was his call to his mule team to a halt by the fence near the gate. Jumping off the sturdy sled, which he had built recently, he fastened the reins to the yard fence. Jack and Jennie, his faithful mules, male and female respectively, rested quietly while Dad had breakfast before driving them into the nearby forest to haul wood.

I skipped every other attic step as I hurried down to enjoy breakfast with Dad. Breakfasts on the Long farm were rather large meals consisting of biscuits and gravy, eggs, ham, and home grown, canned fruit for a dessert. We were in a warm area of the small farmhouse near the cook stove still hot from breakfast preparation. Three rooms were heated by three wood stoves: the kitchen cook stove, the dining room heater, and the living room heater. The stoves consumed voluminous cords of wood during cold winter months when wind raged and temperatures dropped. Born in the hills of the Van Camp community in Wetzel County between the Ohio River towns of Paden City and New Martinsville, West Virginia, I became part of a family whose job it was to accumulate enough wood for multiple stoves.

Breakfast being finished I dressed in warm clothes, followed Dad out the back door, and stepped onto the new sled before the gate in the yard fence clanged shut. When the mules felt my jolt at mounting the sled, they came to attention from a brief slumber. As Dad picked up the reins, the mules stood at attention for their day of hauling wood. "Jackie, are you ready? Hold tightly to the standards (uprights on the sides)," Dad cautioned as he concentrated on rousting the team.

"Git up mules," ordered the driver assuming a more firm and deeper vocal quality for speaking to his team. Perking their long ears up and forward in a state of appropriate readiness, the mammoth muscled creatures gave their strength to pulling the sled slowly at first making a sharp turn in front of the wood shed where they stopped momentarily for the wood cutter to get his tools: cross cut saw, ax, a sledge, and two iron wedges.

"Gee now, Jennie....Easy....Easy," was Dad's gentle direction to the female on the right. A beautiful long eared lady mule, she pulled to the right followed by Jack, the male on the left. A system of check reins caused pressure on the bits in the right side of the mouth of each mule; however Jennie led the way at Dad's command. We had arrived at the wooded area where Dad stopped the team tethering them to a fence post. As his amateur helper I jumped off the sled while the Paul Bunyan-like woodsman threw the ax and saw over his shoulder. Dad's steps made deep impressions in the moist Appalachian layer of humus. They had a magic and super human attraction causing me to increase the length of my stride to follow his

footprints exactly. His steps would take the best route avoiding danger. I felt that I was safe.

“Here is a good firewood tree,” Dad said as he threw his ax and saw near its trunk. Having succumbed to blight in the 1920s, it was a dried chestnut still standing like a ghost from the past among living trees. As if Dad could rely on my limited, innocent presence, he seriously inquired aloud, “Where are we going to land this tree?” Wishing I had an answer, I stood perplexed beside the object of our interest. Like an accomplished surveyor, he cited an ideal place for the tree to fall. Notching the tree several inches from the ground, he began to saw the trunk on the opposite side of the notch. Thus, when the tree was ready to fall it would do so guided by the notch.

After aggressively pushing and pulling the saw back and forth toward the notch, Dad suddenly stood to his full height; he was uneasy about something. “Run, get me the wedges and sledge!” The saw was bound in the trunk as the tree began to lean in the wrong direction. A job which might have been somewhat advanced for me, getting the wedges and sledge to Dad was a priority before the tree fell in the wrong place. Dragging the sledge and clinging tenaciously to the wedges, I arrived at Dad’s side. He grabbed a wedge and stuck it into the saw cut, driving it deeply to free the saw. With the other wedge he changed the direction of the falling tree pounding the wedge tightly with the heavy sledge hammer to make sure the tree was falling where he had originally surveyed. Urgently he asked that I hand him the saw which I found lost among the leaves. He inserted it again into the girth of the leaning tree. With a few more cross cuts the ancient chestnut tree began its crashing descent to exactly where Dad had planned.

As a child I stood stunned at the intense industry of bringing the tree to the ground. The smell of damp, exposed earth and decaying leaves mingled with sawdust and chips around the tree, the echo of the tree falling and reverberating in Pleasant Valley below, the silencing of the birds’ songs at the great furor, the momentary numbing of my senses at the recent combat we had experienced, and the reigning down of broken branches, leaves, and general refuge from surrounding trees caused grave uneasiness as I stepped back hoping the uncommon disruption would pass.

Realizing I was at my limit emotionally, Dad and I sat on the fallen tree for a while simultaneously comforting our spirits and admiring our accomplishment. “You ok, Richie?” he asked using a name of endearment for times of my discomfort. Seated below him on the fallen trunk, I simply looked up at my father knowing everything was in good hands. Words were never spoken.

It was almost noon when Mom brought us a delicious lunch of ham sandwiches and a jar of fresh well water from higher on the hill near the house. After the short lunch break the tree was sawn into eight foot sections. Several of the sections had to be split with the sledge and wedges so that we could lift them. Although the old tree had lost most of its limbs, some remained which became eight foot sections too.

“Jackie, let’s get the mules.” Somewhat exhausted, I was awaiting this joyous invitation. Jack and Jennie were restlessly waiting near an old fence line. The mule driver untied the reins from the fence while I jumped on the sled. We were in the last part of our wood gathering day, loading the disassembled chestnut tree. Each piece of wood had its place on the sled to make a solid load stacked high against the

standards. The larger split pieces were on the bottom while the looser limbs were on the top. The two mules, having been hitched to the sled piled high with wood, seemed to know their greatest challenge lay ahead, pulling the sled heavy with wood up the steep hill to the wood yard.

“Let’s go home, Jackie. This has been a good day! The old chestnut will make great wood for the stoves. Since it’s dry we will have lots of kindling to start the fires.” My father spoke as if he had accomplished a task cheered by an imaginary multitude who



Author beside woodpile and gate  
1938

had gathered around us. He was proud of his day’s work although I was the only one who heard him. Coming back to reality, he paused a while walking around the perfectly assembled load of wood admiring the mules who had been so patient. Holding their heavy heads in his hands as he looked into their big bright eyes partially covered with blinders, he said affectionately “Good boy, Jack....Good girl, Jennie,” to encourage his team for their final, intense exploit of the day. Giving me a boost to the top of the load, he held the reins tightly as he issued the mules the firm command: “Git up! Let’s go! Git up, Jack! Git up, Jennie!” The noble workers tightened on the double tree pulling gently and in unison at first. Then mastering the load with their great strength, they surged forward with the sod flying from their powerful shod hooves.

Soon we pulled into the wood yard parallel to the yard fence. With the mules panting, sweating, frothing, and steaming Dad unhitched the powerful duo and led them to the Little Barn where he gave them another generous treat. Climbing off the old chestnut tree transformed into sections later to be cut into stove length pieces, I threw open the gate and burst into the kitchen of the Long house before the gate clicked shut. When I entered the kitchen, Mom greeted me obviously concerned about my wellbeing. She never found out about our battle with the old chestnut.

September third and fourth of 1938 are two days of excitement permanently fixed in my memory, the history lesson day of attending New Martinsville's centennial and the challenging day of conquering the old chestnut. As the sun set, the forest regained its usual sylvan silence. Later in the darkness, nocturnal creatures inventoried the battered area to find one very old tree missing, the familiar chestnut, landmark of countless generations of wildlife.

