

Backroads: Christmas at the Camp

December 2, 2022





A decorated cedar and trunk filled with gifts.

The Christmas season always brings back a fullness of heart when I think of the holidays I've spent in Love, Virginia. I have celebrated Christmas in a variety of houses here on the mountain, but the ones that stick in my mind the most were the years spent in the little green hunting camp I rented and called home from 1980 to 1983 and again from 1990 until 1993. Nestled between two steep mountains with Back Creek flowing right out the door, the view from the camp was isolated and spectacular.

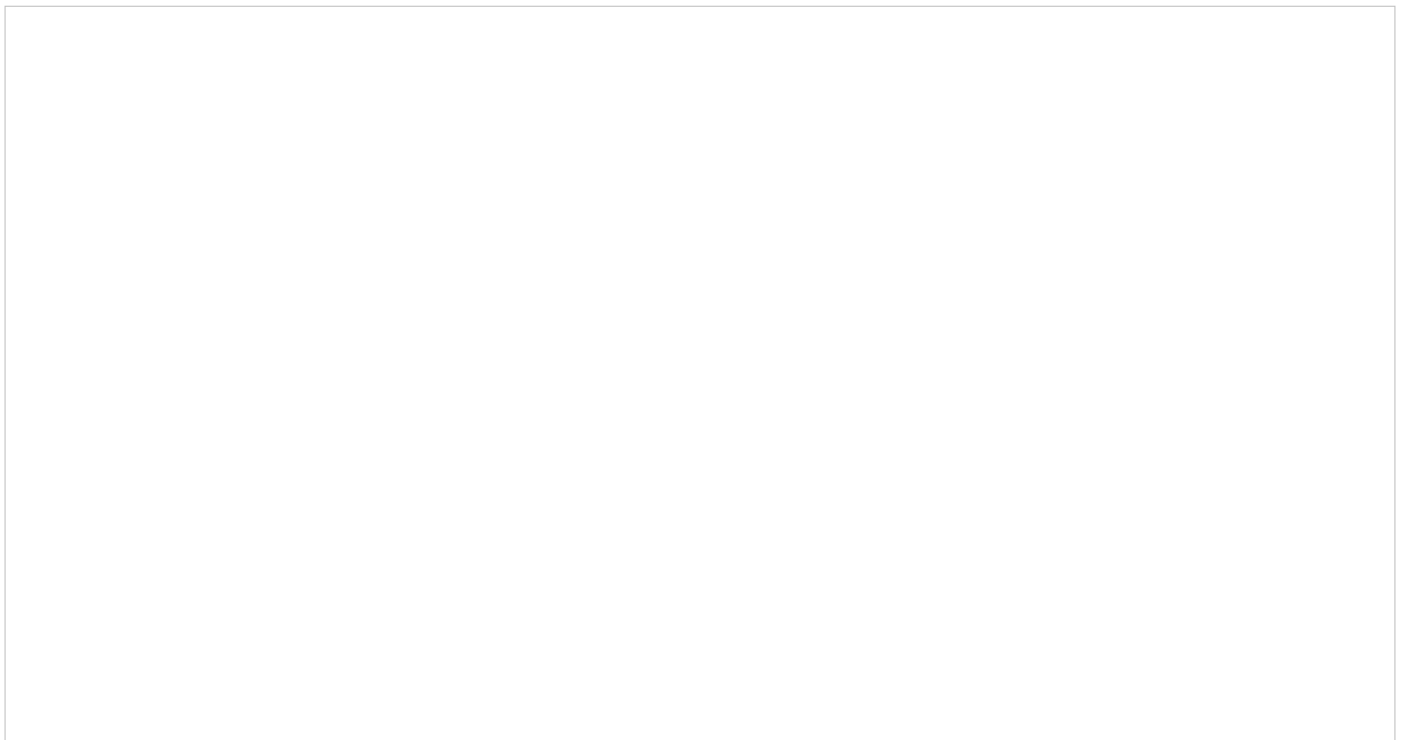


The camp pictured in winter.

The first Christmas there was the most exciting for me because I was living

the mountain life I had dreamed about since childhood. If the camp lacked modern conveniences, I never paid much attention. I was too enamored with living in the Blue Ridge to notice my new digs didn't have one bit of insulation. When the wind blew, so did the curtains! The indoor bathroom was so small one could sit on the potty, stick feet in the shower, and wash hands in the miniscule sink without ever having to move. The kitchen was equally tiny, but a real step saver when it came to doing five things at once. The rest of the house made up for it, with four bedrooms and an enormous living/dining area in the front. There was a bar on one end and a long harvest table that could seat fourteen on the other. Boards were nailed directly to the rafters, providing a cathedral ceiling throughout.

Because the ceiling was so high, our first Christmas tree was a monster. The top of a blue spruce was cut from a neighbor's tree and it had to be cut three more times before it would fit inside the house. Once the behemoth was in place, my daughter Heather and I strung long strands of popcorn and cranberry garlands on it, standing on the bar to reach the top. Other adornments were white lights, red plaid bows and pinecones sprinkled with glitter. With an old quilt spread around its base, it looked like something out of a Laura Ingalls novel.





Back Creek flowing out the back door.

Although I loved living at the camp, by the summer of 1983 the roof was leaking so badly I had learned the rudiments of sleeping with a galvanized bucket on my chest to catch the drips. Since the beds were nailed to the wall, I had no other choice but to learn the fine art of balance. A move down the mountain was made when the leaks became unbearable.

When my first marriage dissolved, I found myself living back at the camp, sad but determined to make a happier future for myself. That Christmas was

frugal to say the least. I cut a shapely cedar at a co-worker's farm and loaded it in the back of my '51 Ford pickup and drove home. I dug out candles with white lights and put them in every window. I hiked up the mountain and pulled up running cedar to decorate the fireplace mantle. Coming back down, the sight of the camp all aglow against a backdrop of dark blue mountains caused a lump to form in my throat and I felt a joy I hadn't known for quite some time. Suddenly the lack of material goods seemed trivial compared to the richness my heart felt. Stepping through the back door, the aroma of fresh cedar filled the house and I threw a few more logs in the woodstove, turned on some Christmas music and put my feet up. I filled an antique trunk with wrapped presents for my daughter and strung some colored lights in the antlers of a deer head mounted over the fireplace. The whole effect was cozy, especially when I turned out the lights and lit a few oil lamps. The dim yellow glow of their flames cast long shadows about the room and set the scene for simplicity.

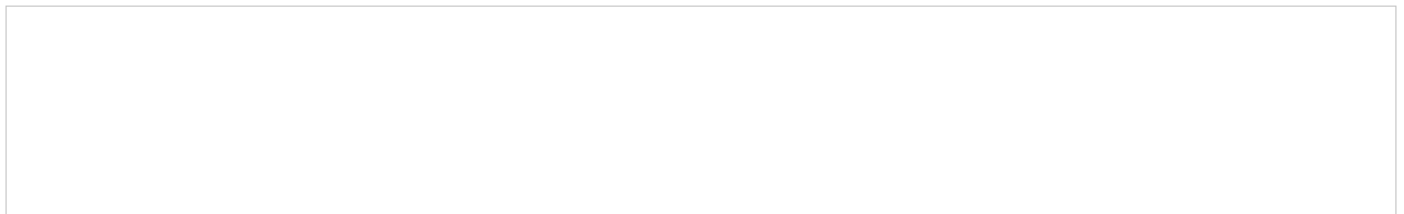


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I celebrated two more Christmases in that fashion and although I was alone, I was never lonely. Then the unexpected happened. My family of two turned into a multitude of blessings as December 1992 rolled around. My mother, whom I hadn't celebrated a Christmas with in twenty-five years, moved to Waynesboro just about the time I began dating my up-the-road neighbor and the miracle of love unfolded as Billy Coffey and I began planning our future together.



Although we've had many happy Christmases in our own cabin since, the one at the camp remains the dearest. For it was there I received a gift that had eluded me for so long: peace of mind, hope for the future and a heart full of love. The verse of Jeremiah 29:11 that I had clung to during the hard times became a living reality as its timeless words spoke to me. "I know the plans I have for you, saith the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil; to give you a future and a hope."

May each of you, regardless of your circumstances, be thankful this Christmas season for the simple blessings God gives as well as the greatest gift a loving Father can bestow; the gift of his Son.

Backroads: Crows

April 8, 2022



Our three crows dining with the chickens. Photo: Lynn Coffey.

Not everyone is a fan of the common crow. Gardeners detest the way they pull up tender shoots of corn before the plants attain enough growth to fend them off. People who feed the birds are annoyed at the aggressive way they hog seed at the feeders and drive the smaller birds away. In general, they are not the most favored in the bird kingdom. One man I know would shoot an offending corn plucker and dangle its lifeless body on a swivel so the wind would catch its wing and twirl it around. This was supposed to be a detrimental sign to other crows to think again before visiting his garden. I'm not sure about crows, but the macabre vision would make me think twice before snatching a ripe tomato off his vines! Another lady always referred to them as "flying rats." Oh, woe, the crow!

I, on the other hand, am a connoisseur of the naughty black birds. They have

funny personalities and if watched on a daily basis, can enlighten one in their ways. Currently, we now have three crows that stay within the perimeter of our property. No matter what time of day I go out and summon them with my strange crow call, they come flying in to see what tasty morsels I have for them. If I'm late, all three will perch on the back fence and cackle amongst themselves until I come out with leftovers. The "flying rats" clean up every bite. Kind of like a garbage disposal but more fun to watch.

These three are the offspring of two former crows; Ezra and his wife, Esther, who showed up one day and stayed until Ezra got so old his blue/black feathers had actually turned gray. One year in early spring, they both came like clockwork for their breakfast until we noticed Ezra was alone one morning.



Old Ezra in his last days. Photo: Lynn Coffey.

He ate whatever we threw out and then would pack his bill full and fly off for a few minutes before returning to resume his feast. This continued for a time and we wondered if something had happened to Esther because crows'

generally mate for life. The mystery was solved when one morning I heard a racket in the backyard and looked out to see Ezra, Esther, and three immature fledglings hunkered down following Mama making a plaintive cry of hunger. When the leftovers came, she carefully fed each baby bird its share. This went on until it was plain the “babies” were big enough to forage for themselves but kept on pestering their mother for sustenance. She, at the end of her rope, began the process of making them fully independent by ignoring their constant chatter.

Just by watching their habits, I learned when I heard their incessant raucous cawing in the hedgerow that some type of intruder was eminent. Watching their location, a bobcat, a roaming dog, and once, a mama bear and her two cubs came out from the brambles underneath the heckling crows. I also learned that a soaring hawk or lone raven were no match for the fearsome three. They chased and dove and nipped at the interlopers until they were forced from the crow’s territory. Every now and then the raven would dare to land and help himself to the backyard bounty before the crows showed up, but it was a rare instance.

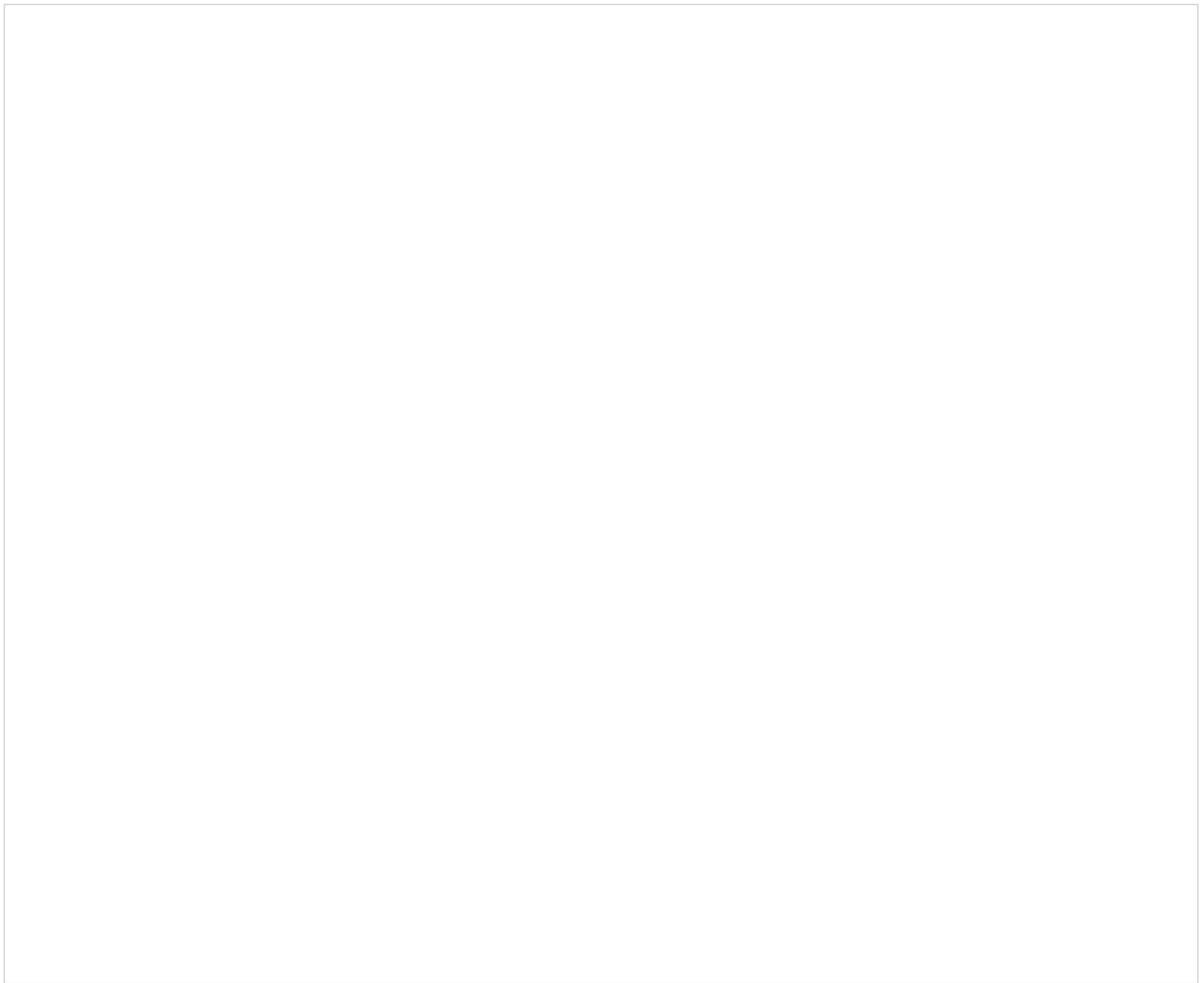


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"Waiting for breakfast." Photo: Lynn Coffey.

Crows are very clever and one of the most intelligent of all birds. It's not uncommon to see crows carrying tree nuts and dropping them on the road where vehicles will run over them and then returning to pick the nutmeats from the crushed shells. A group of crows is called a murder but can also be called a horde or a flock. In the wild, the average lifespan is seven to eight years. In captivity, it can be much longer. The normal number of eggs in a clutch is anywhere from three to nine and their tree nests consist of sticks or twigs lined with grass, bark and moss. Eggs are a bluish/green color with brown streaks. Normal habitat is a wooded area close to open fields. Crows can remember the faces of individual humans and can hold grudges on those who aren't nice to them. On the other hand, they have been known to

bring “presents” to those who show kindness. It was recorded that an eight-year-old girl who had an interesting relationship with crows had been brought gifts such as buttons, paper clips and shiny nails for her kindness to them.

Young crows from prior years often help their parents take care of newly hatched babies. They are not picky eaters, and their diet can include fruit, mice, frogs, insects, nuts, carrion, and of course, table scraps. What they can't eat, they often cache. We have seen our crows eat their fill and then bury the rest. Whether they ever go back and find what they've buried we have yet to know. One thing I do know—they don't seem to like green beans! They will pick them out of whatever we feed them and lay them off to the side.

It's almost time to be thinking about planting, and as we drop seed corn in the rows, a neighbor remarked she's noticed that our crows never seem to bother anything in our garden. I told her that's our reward for feeding them “leftovers!”

Backroads: A Mother's Day Tribute to "Bubba Jean"

May 4, 2022





The last photo of Laverta Coffey

Her name was Laverta Jean Bruce Coffey, but her four children and several others she raised affectionately called her "Bubba Jean" and somehow the name stuck. In high school, the first time she laid eyes on a quiet, blond-haired boy by the name of Saylor Coffey, she announced to everyone, "That's the boy I'm going to marry," even though they hadn't been formally introduced. It was something she knew in the depths of her heart and as fate would have it, they married right after graduation.

Becoming Saylor's wife (or Billy as his family called him) brought a different way of life right from the start. Like so many young couples, they started their married life together living with Billy's parents until they could build a house of their own in the remote mountain village of Love. Always a homebody, Laverta wanted nothing more from life than to be a good wife to the husband she adored and called "my honey," and bear his children. They had four; Teresa, David, Mike and Rebecca, who were the delight of their mother's heart.

Laverta was a naturally shy woman when around people she didn't know, but at home on her own turf she was an outgoing lady with a quick wit, making everyone around her laugh.

I made her acquaintance in 1980 when I moved to Love and became neighbors with the Coffey family. I interviewed the Coffeys when writing an article about bluegrass music in the Backroads newspaper. They were a family blessed with an abundance of musical talent. From the playing of stringed instruments to their beautiful vocals, they were always in demand at gospel sings and church homecomings. Laverta played an upright bass and rounded out the vocals with her low alto voice.

She had short black hair streaked with gray and merry brown eyes. Her ample lap was always filled with squirming children or some type of animal, both of which she'd rise to the defense of if she thought someone was mistreating them. But what I remember best about Laverta was her laughter, rich and full-bodied just like the rest of her.

I remember one winter she slipped on ice and broke her ankle. I was out delivering the Backroads and when I came to the door, Laverta yelled, "come in and sign my cast!" She was lying in the living room with her foot propped up and wasn't satisfied until I came in and wrote a bit of nonsense on her cast.

Sometime in the late 1980s I began attending the little country church at the top of the mountain where the Coffeys were members. I loved sitting one pew behind them, watching their crazy antics as they filed in for services. It did my heart good to see such unabashed joy in a family and it strengthened my belief that happy marriages still existed. Laverta's quiet faith grew in the years that followed, and her children knew they had a mother who prayed for them every day.



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As our friendship grew, I found we both shared the same interest in photography, but Laverta went one step further and set up a darkroom in the bathroom of her home where she developed prints of her family.

She had just started going with me on some of my interviews when the unthinkable happened. At forty-two years of age, she lost her life in an auto accident. The Coffey family as well as our community was numb with grief. There were so many at her funeral they had to open the church doors and windows so people standing four-deep outside could hear the service. Healing was a slow process, but gradually the family began to go on, their faith deepening through the tragedy.

Five years later another unthinkable thing happened. The neighborly friendship Billy and I had shared suddenly caught fire and we married in the spring of 1993. I found myself living Laverta's life, with a loving and supportive husband along with four more children and the grandchildren I knew she would have loved gathering on her lap.

When we moved to our new cabin, I came across the last studio portrait of Laverta and Billy in one of the closets of their former home. I dusted it off and hung it on the wall along with our other family pictures so everyone could see and know she was a welcome presence in our home. Laverta was a dedicated, Godly woman who loved deeply and knew the power of prayer.

And that is why on this Mother's Day I'd like to pay tribute to the special woman who will always be revered and remembered by those who loved "Bubba Jean."