

Requiem for the Mountain People

December 2, 2022



The Campbell siblings: Owen, May Bell, Jimmy

In the southern highlands of Virginia native mountain people grew up in small hamlets named White Rock, Montebello, Chicken Holler and Love. Living in multigenerational cabins that had little in the way of modern conveniences, each tiny community was a self-contained unit that served the people living in and around its boundaries. These rugged, self-sufficient individuals grew and raised what was needed for everyday life in the isolated mountain regions of home.



The sisters' schoolhouse home

In the 42 years I have lived among them, the mountain people and their secluded way of life have taken up permanent residence in my heart and etched memories that have taken root, never to be forgotten. These native people aren't anything like the stereotype hillbilly image the media makes them out to be. I was told they would not accept "outsiders" and were wary and clannish. Living among them, I've found the people of the Blue Ridge to be humble and giving, truthful and wise. But they are a private people, and one must respect their ways.

Of all the mountain people I've known, there were five that stood out from all the rest. They were different in that they chose to live the same austere lifestyle their parents and grandparents lived before them even though the world and all its modernization was staring them in the face. I'd like to share my friendship with these five rugged individuals as a way of keeping their memories alive, so the younger generation will know what life was like before today's technology took over their world.

Owen Garfield, May Bell and James Napoleon "Jimmy" Campbell were the three unmarried siblings of Matthew Owen and Annie Loh Cash Campbell who lived on a 300-acre mountain farm known as the Averill Campbell place, under the shadow of Spy Rock. Without any modern conveniences, these three eked out a living in their isolated hollow, living a sustainable lifestyle before the phrase was coined.

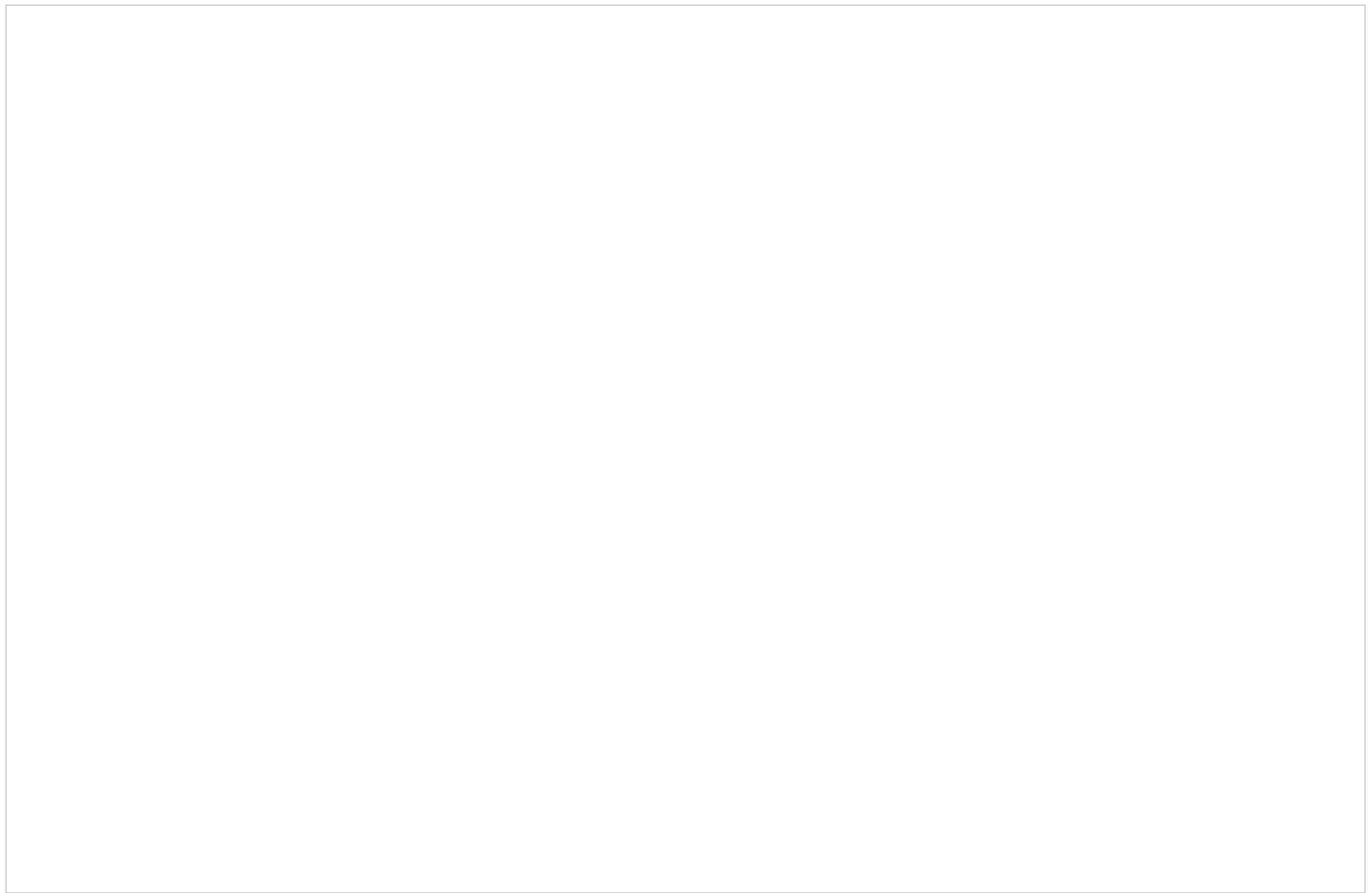




Owen at the family graveyard

Their first cousins, Willie Frances and Mary Jane Cash, lived on the backside of Crabtree Falls in a place aptly named Cashtown, which was seven miles from the nearest country store. The sisters, two of ten children born to Cyrus Gordon and Judith Frances Campbell Cash, lived their whole lives unmarried just like their Campbell cousins and were the toughest women I've ever known. At ninety years of age, Frances was still chopping wood with a maul, metal wedges and her trusty double-sided axe. Their usual dress was their brothers' castoff clothing and boots.

All five were members of Mount Paran Baptist Church, where my husband Billy was the pastor. Each year they walked out and attended the August homecoming service and the nightly revival services that followed. They all loved Billy and called him "My Preacher." And it always tickled me that, although they knew my name, they always referred to me as "The Preacher's Woman."



The Campbell homeplace

Frances was delivered into this world by her paternal grandmother, Lydia Campbell Cash, on February 26, 1930. Mary came on September 29, 1941 and was the only child of the ten delivered by Gracie Cash, a neighbor. The family raised their ten children in an abandoned schoolhouse converted into a home. They lived secluded lives in an isolated mountain hollow and kept mostly to themselves. Frances said that as children, they didn't get much education. I never realized she and her sister could not read or write until I interviewed them for the book *Appalachian Heart*. The closest school was across a steep ridge on Nettle Mountain and Frances said she went only to the third grade because, "In the wintertime, it was just too hard on me. It took so long to thaw out my feet in front of the woodstove once I got there." I, imagining she had to take off her socks and shoes, asked if they were dry enough to wear back home that afternoon. Her answer floored me: "I didn't have any shoes. I walked to school in my bare feet." Incredulously, I volunteered that I heard of people wrapping their feet in rags, tying them on

with baling twine. Once again, I was shocked by Frances' reply: "Honey, we were so poor we didn't have rags."

Even without formal schooling, from eighteen years of age they never missed the opportunity to vote in every Presidential election. If the sisters didn't have education, they had grit. Frances worked each fall in local apple orchards, helping to pick that year's crop destined for far off places. She was thin and wiry and didn't mind climbing up the ladder to the very top of the trees that were much taller than the newer dwarf varieties. Mary, the shyer of the two, stayed home and helped her mother and from her father she learned the craft of weaving white oak baskets. I asked Frances if she learned to make baskets and she replied, "No, I was too busy timbering!" Frances knew how to handle a chainsaw and cut locust posts for a lot of local farmers for fencing. She cut trees and wielded her trusty two-sided axe to cut smaller pieces of wood used for heating and the cookstove. They walked to the nearest country store and carried their purchases back home in a feed sack slung over their shoulders.





Two Cash sisters, Mary and Frances

Winters were harsh and snowfalls were deep. Frances told how she and Mary shoveled their way out to the "main road" (a rocky, dirt path, really) with nothing but farm shovels, taking two full days to cover a distance of about four miles. At the time, Frances was sixty years old, Mary, forty-nine.

In the early 1990s the Grant family of Montebello moved the sisters out of the mountains, into a little cottage a few miles closer to the country store. Although the home had electricity and was equipped with an electric stove, they continued to use their wood cookstove until they passed away.

Once, we took the sisters back to their homeplace in the winter, making the

long walk down the rocky path together. These two women were like mountain goats, flitting from one steep place to another, seemingly never to tire. I told my husband that on the way back out, he needed to lead the pack and stop to ask the sisters questions so I could catch my breath!

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Homecoming at Mt. Paran with preacher Billy Coffey

he most humorous memory I recall was the time I was out delivering the Backroads newspapers to the Montebello Country Store and found the sisters sitting inside. I asked if they wanted a ride home and they had to quietly confer amongst themselves as to whether they would ride or walk the two miles home. In the end they opted for the ride. It was a hot summer day and I was driving a 1968 Ford Fairlane convertible with the top down. The sisters climbed in the back seat and as we drove off, I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw their long gray hair blowing wildly in the breeze and heard

Frances say, "Lynn, I don't think I ever saw a car that didn't have a top."

I met the Campbells one by one, with Owen being the first. I was completely fascinated by him. Tall and thin, wearing bib overalls, and a worn denim jacket, his outfit was topped off with a faded Carhartt hat with ear flaps. He was sporting a toothless grin that lit up his face and he talked in a high-pitched voice that went up several octaves when he got excited. The deep creases around his kind eyes told of years of humor and the gentle disposition for which he was known.

He was the eldest of Matthew and Annie Cash Campbell's three children, born on June 16, 1923. As a young man, Owen worked with his daddy, cutting extract wood with crosscut saws. He got up early to do chores, such as feeding and watering his horse, which he used to plow the garden. He could cook a little, making a pone of cornbread whenever he took a notion. He could play a little guitar. He had a strong faith and was not shy about telling others about God's love. Owen never married, but he loved little children, talking to them at their level in a little childlike voice.

Owen's sister, May Bell, (Oct. 27, 1926) was just as interesting as he was. Tiny in stature, May Bell was a wonder. Keeping house and cooking meals for her brothers, she also worked alongside them doing the many chores their family needed to survive without benefit of *any* modern conveniences. She milked her Jersey cow, "Fluff," each day and put the fresh milk in the springhouse to be kept cold. Visiting the Campbells after dark was not recommended because May Bell was a crack shot with a rifle and if she heard a noise outside she couldn't readily identify, she would shoot first and ask questions later!

Like all the mountain women, May Bell always wore an apron over her dress and the apron had an abundance of safety pins on it. The pins weren't holding anything together ...they were just hanging there. When asked what their purpose was, May Bell looked at me as though I was a complete ignoramus and replied, "Because you never know when you're going to need

a safety pin."

Jimmy, the baby of the family, (Mar. 2, 1931), was not as outgoing as his brother, but just as colorful. My first introduction to him came at the end of a shotgun! I had blocked the road up to their house with my truck and as I went to leave, I encountered a man aiming a gun at me, fussing at my lack of common sense. Later, I was forgiven and I found James Napoleon Campbell had a tender heart under all that fuss. Once he took out his wallet and showed me a picture of a woman and a little boy. The photo was yellow with age and frayed around the edges from use. He asked me, "Do you know who they are?" I commented that no, I didn't know them, but said the child was the most beautiful little boy I had ever seen. "That's me and my mother. I wouldn't take a million dollars for that picture!" I often wondered what became of that treasured photo after Jimmy's death.

Like their Cash cousins, none of the Campbells drove a vehicle, preferring to walk the mountains they knew like the back of their hands. But as the siblings aged, the insightful people of Montebello provided a phone so in case of an emergency, they could call out for help. This proved to be a real obstacle for the phone company, since the road into the Campbells' home was nothing but rocks. No problem. The lines were simply strung through the trees the entire distance.

As time passed, Owen, May Bell and Jimmy became increasingly disabled. One by one they left the earth and were buried side by side in the family graveyard that overlooked their homeplace. Owen was the first. He died on January 14, 2014, at 90 years of age. When Owen left this world, bound for the eternal heaven he believed in, he had little in the way of personal possessions: a shotgun, a bed, and a small shaving mirror. But what he lacked in material goods, he made up for in a rich legacy of living. His sister May Bell was next, passing on September 9, 2014, just eight months after Owen. She was 87 years of age. Jimmy died on January 9, 2015, one year after Owen, at 83 years of age.

The Cash sisters followed. Mary passed on December 27, 2021. Frances was next on August 12, 2022. They lived and worked side by side, doing things together as a team their whole lives. It was only fitting they were buried in the same way; side by side in the Mt. Paran Church cemetery.

With the deaths of these five mountain cousins came the death of a way of life that will never again be replicated. Years ago, I came across an old Russian proverb that said it best: "You live as long as you are remembered." I've written these memories so some portion of their exceptional lives will remain now that they're gone.