

I come from a family of storytellers, of laughter and tears generated through talk across a Sunday supper. The cadence and pitch of my parents and grandparents is deeply embedded in my memory. The sound of my father singing brings me back to my earliest days. I will always be his baby girl, brown as a biscuit from summers on the lake. He will always be my Daddy. Our family story is one of struggle and success. What is familiar to me are the stories from Brushy Holler, but our family goes back much further, even to the founding of the nation. To say that our heritage is a mixture of settlers from various lands is as close as I can get to the identification of our family origins. We are the melting pot and within we have alloyed French, German, English, Irish, Scotch, and Native American. As these components are inseparable in subsequent generations, I will simply say we are Americans.

Brushy Holler is in Greenup County Kentucky, on the northern tip of the state, where all tributaries flow into the mighty Ohio River. Both of my parents grew up in the holler and attended the Hampton School. My father tells a story of his adolescence and how hard he worked to catch my mother's eye. He and his brothers were swimming in Tiger Creek, a short walk from the family farms. Daddy thought he would show off by diving into the muddy water. He made sure my mom was watching. In his recollection, he made a beautiful dive with "nary a splash." What he could not see was the large rock which had washed into the swimming hole with the snow melt that year. He came up with a busted head and feeling a little woozy. His efforts to make an impression certainly succeeded, just not in the way he had intended. My mother would tell a different story, centered on the fact that Daddy's perception was skewed to soothe his ego, that his perfectly splashless dive was more like a belly flop.

My brother became our family historian in his early thirties and traveled through counties and states in pursuit of historic remnants which would elucidate our spoken history. What he discovered was that our family was composed of storytellers of remarkable acuity.

A story from our maternal grandmother, as recounted by my brother, Robert Joseph Hale.

There was one story that Della Brown told me about her grandmother, Polly Middleton. When Polly was eighteen or nineteen she got pregnant and had a little girl who was Della's mother, Ellie Middleton. A year or so later Polly got sick and the girls swabbed down the cabin. Her mother, ole Barbara Ellen Middleton, was a midwife and she would go traveling around with her big black sackful of equipment. She came home and the girls had swabbed down the cabin. She said, "Oh lordy, lordy girls, you've kilt her, you've kilt her. Heat up the stove let's warm this place up." Awhile later, Polly was real bad off and she said, "Mama, come tomorrow morning I'm afraid there gonna burry me under that little cedar up there on top of the hill." Barbara Ellen said, "Hush up, hush up child. Don't talk like that. Don't say those things." Anyway, Polly died that night.

Some years ago when I was in law school, we found the cemetery. The cows were tracking through it and the tombstones were all broken up. I helped fence it off. I found Polly's mother and father, Barbara Ellen and Jimmy Middleton. There was a huge old cedar tree by that time and sure enough, there was a little grave at the bottom. We started looking down over the hillside and saw a grove of trees. My aunt Geneva and I climbed

down the hillside and we found an old flagstone floor and some pieces of an old pot-bellied stove. We had found the Middleton Homestead there and that little cedar tree on the hill was now a giant. Polly was in the graveyard, right up on the ridge.

I imagine that my family history is similar to many pioneer stories, strong men who wrung a living from the land, strong women who molded the homestead into their home. My migration project was inspired by the individuals who built my heritage. The base is a "Ball" Mason jar, just like the ones in my grandmothers' cellars, filled with everything from blackberry jam to homemade sausage. The Mason jar is filled with obsidian glass, representing the coal rich mountains. There is also red glass to represent the bond of shared blood. The tree is rooted to the base in a gnarled and tangled manner to mimic the scene faced by pioneers, trailblazing through thick wilderness in search of a homestead. Finally, the materials of the tree, steel and copper, were the same as those my grandfathers used to build. Roy Brown worked in the Navy yard building warships. Wade Hale worked to build the first steel bridges suited for railways in the state of Kentucky. They sent their earnings home to family Brushy Holler.

The recording that plays in the video, as my family tree is constructed, is my father singing one of the many songs which permeated my childhood. It is a song about earthly struggle and eternal reward. It is about strength and faith, two traits my family has held dear.

A spiritual song as sung by my father, Robert Wade Hale.

My Lord keeps a record
Of the moments I'm living down here
He knows all about me
My sorrows, my trouble, my fears
And living each moment
Through the mercies of his loving grace
And some day he will call me
To the wonderful, beautiful place