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“We Didn’t Have a Lot of Money, We Worked Hard, and We Ate Beans”: Examining the
Narrative Inheritance From an Appalachian Father to His Son

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Liberal Studies

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

by

Thomas W. Townsend

December 2020

Dr. Marie Tedesco Chair

Dr. Amber Kinser

Dr. Andrew Herrmann

Keywords: autoethnography, oral history, Appalachia, parental death, Carter County Tennessee

ABSTRACT

“We Didn’t Have a Lot of Money, We Worked Hard, and We Ate Beans”: Examining the

Narrative Inheritance From an Appalachian Father to His Son

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The author contends that narratives, shaped not only by events but also by socioeconomic and geographic factors, are narratives that require exploration and analysis because these narratives build the lives in which individuals exist. By understanding narratives passed down with which they have built their lives, individuals can come to greater understanding of the narratives in which they live. To understand the narratives, he created and continues to craft about his life, the author needed to understand his narrative inheritance. When a proposed thesis study imploded, the focus of the study shifted to exploring the circumstances of a single interview with the author’s father. By examining methodology as originally intended and subsequently executed, setting the narrative in the proper historical context, and exploring relevant literature on oral history and autoethnography, the author crafted an evocative autoethnographical account of a complex father-son relationship.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated first to my father who learned to grow. I also dedicate this to my children who teach me how to grow with them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my committee head, Dr. Marie Tedesco whose support, passion, guidance, and eternal patience is a kindness I can never repay and for which I am eternally grateful. Her time and optimism were (are) key in the thesis process. I would like to acknowledge my committee, Dr. Amber Kinser and Dr. Andrew Herrmann, who started me on this journey. I would like to thank Dr. Jill Leroy-Frazier for her encouragement and advice. Thank you to my cohorts who are too many to list and all of whom share with me in my success.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
DEDICATION.....	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	5
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	8
Memoir and Autoethnography in Appalachia.....	9
Interdisciplinary Nature of this Thesis.....	11
CHAPTER 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.....	15
Carter County, Tennessee.....	15
Industrialization: Rayon Plants and Economic Opportunities.....	17
Milligan College: Religion and Higher Education.....	20
Carter County as Part of Appalachia.....	21
Conclusion.....	22
CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	23
Oral History.....	23
Research Focus Shift: From Oral History to Autoethnography.....	27
Definition of Autoethnography.....	28
Emergence of Autoethnography.....	29
Autoethnography’s Critics.....	34
Conclusion.....	37
CHAPTER 4. METHODS.....	38
Part One: The Proposed Study.....	38
The Single Interview.....	40
Part Two: From Oral History to Autoethnography.....	42
CHAPTER 5. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY:.....	44
BILLY AND ME: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF MY FATHER AND HIS SON.....	44
Prologue: Narrative Inheritance.....	44
A Sunday Morning in March 2020.....	47
Simply the Best: September 1979.....	50
A Sunday in March 2020 – Part 2: 10 Minutes Earlier (Walking in My Shoes).....	54
The Interview (Part One).....	55

Interlude: The Autobiographical Obituary	60
The Interview (Part 2)	64
August 2017: Don't Take Your Guns to Town.....	71
Epilogue	80
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION.....	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY	85
APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	95
VITA.....	97

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

My father shaped my life that I will continue to understand from new perspectives. My life has been-molded not only by his and my efforts to define who I am but also by who my father was. To understand this symbiosis, I examined a pivotal moment that started as an oral history interview. This interview became a permanent snapshot of who he wanted to be and how I am still coming to know him after his death. I examine the stories in which we found ourselves living through the influence of our shared residence in rural Appalachia and through autoethnography.¹

I contend that multigenerational narratives, shaped not only by events but also by socioeconomic and geographic factors, are narratives that require exploration and analysis because these narratives build the lives in which individuals exist. By understanding the transmitted narratives with which they have built their lives, individuals can come to greater understanding or can change the narratives in which they live. To understand the narratives, I inherited, created, and continue to craft about my father's life, I first needed to understand the narrative inheritance with which I was left. My original thesis project evaporated when most of my intended study participants decided – after I had approved the study through my thesis chair and sought IRB approval – not to take part after all. Left with pieces of a puzzle that could no longer be completed, my mentor encouraged me to use autoethnography to examine my relationship with the participant, my father, through the single interview which remained.

¹There is the Appalachia of the Appalachian Regional Commission (<https://www.arc.gov>) and the Appalachia (now usually referred to as southern Appalachia) of John C. Campbell's work *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1921, 10, https://www.russellsage.org/sites/default/files/Campbell_Southern%20Highlander%20Homeland_0.pdf). East Tennessee, including Carter County, falls within southern Appalachia..

My thesis takes form in six parts. First is this introduction, divided into two parts: an examination of the interdisciplinarity of the thesis, which describes the nature of my examination, and a personal layered narrative framing my discovery of autoethnography. The second chapter helps to frame the historical context of the culture and time in which my father lived and the ways in which the culture and time affected both him and me in my formative years. Chapter Three is a review of the relevant literature of oral history and autoethnography. Chapter Four discusses the methods I originally employed in my study of oral history and the method of autoethnography. The fifth chapter is my autoethnographic account that includes the interview with my father and a discussion of our often-fraught relationship. Chapter Six is a brief conclusion.

Memoir and Autoethnography in Appalachia

My project examines my life narratives and those of my father. The southern Appalachia region serves as a cultural and sociological backdrop for our lives. Memoir and narrative non-fiction on the “Appalachian experience” is a genre of work that combines personal or family narrative against a specific socioeconomic and geographic background. Many writers have used autobiography, memoir, and autoethnography in examining their Appalachian heritage. In the preface to examination of her Appalachian heritage, *Power in the Blood*, Linda Tate explains that “my intention is to bring the past to life as authentically as possible while still maintaining confidentiality.” She highlighted that “the interpretation of events is solely my own. History and art, fiction and nonfiction, weave together in *my* telling of our family tale” [original emphasis]² In *Red, White, Black, and Blue* by William M. Drennen, Jr. and Kojo (William T.) Jones, Jr, the authors collaborate to examine issues of race, Appalachia, and their experiences in West Virginia

² *Power in the Blood: A Family Narrative* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), xi.

in the mid-twentieth century.³ In *Creeker*, set in Two-Mile Creek, Kentucky, Linda Scott DeRosier wrote “without the bounty of other folks’ memories, however, this book would have been much less accurate-and far less pleasurable to create.”⁴ Jeff Mann wrote memoir and poetry about his experiences as a gay man living his life in Virginia and West Virginia. “I have been fortunate in the excavation of this story to have had my own reminiscences restored.”⁵ Writing narrative non-fiction requires resilience on the part of the author. Otis Trotter wrote of being Appalachian and African American, “writing this book has been a long journey of introspection, reflection and a vicissitude of emotions. At times I wanted to abandon the idea, second-guessed whether or not my story was compelling enough to share.”⁶ These writers’ journeys, as well as my own, require of the storyteller/scholar a common trait: perseverance.

Scholars in Appalachia have used autoethnography in examination of their lives and experiences. Scholars from rural Appalachian backgrounds have described their upbringings and their influences on their life paths. Robin Redmon Wright, from a rural East Tennessee background, wrote an “autoethnographical exploration of key events in the author’s life that influenced, even propelled, her into academia, despite working-class cultural and economic barriers.”⁷ Writers have examined the role of Appalachia on the workplace. Annalee Tull wrote “From the outside looking in, I heard about the backwoods ways of Tennesseans or southern Appalachians” in her examination of her Appalachian identity in the workplace.⁸ Student

³ *Red, White, Black & Blue: A Dual Memoir of Race and Class in Appalachia* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004).

⁴ *Creeker: A Woman's Journey* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), xvi.

⁵ *Loving Mountains, Loving Men: Memoir and Poetry* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), Google eBook.

⁶ *Keeping Heart: A Memoir of Family Struggle, Race, and Medicine* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2015) “Acknowledgments,” Google eBook.

⁷ “Comics, Kitsch, and Class: an Autoethnographic Exploration of an Accidental Academic,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29, no. 3 (2016): 426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2015.1078518>.

⁸ “Dolly, Ellie May, and Me: My Southern Appalachian Working Identity” in *Organizational Autoethnographies: Power and Identity in Our Working Lives*, ed. Andrew F. Herrmann (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 71.

scholars used autoethnography, as well, to chronicle and examine their Appalachian experiences. In her thesis, Donna Corriher noted “autoethnography includes examination of the community historical and social influences” in regard to contemplating her rural upbringing in Appalachian Virginia and its influence on her life or life’s path.⁹ Mathias Detamore, in his dissertation, explores through autoethnography his own participation and research in examination of Appalachian queer identity.¹⁰ Autoethnography is an established method of inquiry into the Appalachian experience.

Interdisciplinary Nature of this Thesis

In pursuit of my research, I have used scholarship and research techniques from a variety of disciplines, including, but not limited to, oral history, Appalachian studies, communication studies, philosophy, music, and sociology. Interdisciplinarity, according to Joe Moran, “is about how we organize knowledge into disciplines, and then reorganize it into new configurations and alliances, or forms of ‘interdisciplinarity’, when these old ways of thinking have come to seem stale, irrelevant, inflexible, and exclusory.” Moran explains that to understand interdisciplinarity, one must understand the disciplines that exist. “Interdisciplinary approaches are always an engagement with [existing disciplines], and the modes of knowledge that they exclude by virtue of their separation from each other.” According to Moran, “discipline” denotes both a body of study and a maintenance of order that alludes to a “moral training.” Discipline, for Moran, is situated in between knowledge and power. “When we use the word

⁹ "Dear Johnny Depp: Would You Please Buy the State of West Virginia? Autoethnography of an Appalachian Woman" (MA thesis., Appalachian State University, 2012), 35.

https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/f/Corriher,%20Donna_2012_Thesis2.pdf.

¹⁰ "Queer Appalachia: Toward Geographies of Possibility" (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, Lexington, 2010), 57. https://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschool_diss/57. https://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschool_diss/57.

‘interdisciplinary,’ we are generally suggesting some kind of critical awareness of this relationship.”¹¹

Moran wrote “interdisciplinarity could therefore be seen as a way of living with disciplines more critically and self-consciously, recognizing that their most basic assumptions can always be challenged or reinvigorated by new ways of thinking from elsewhere.”¹² This middle ground appears to be a habitable space for traditional disciplined academics and progressive scholars as well that does not dampen the power of interdisciplinarity. As Robert Pippin noted, a danger exists that traditional disciplines can seem “indicted” by the existence of an interdisciplinary program.¹³ Moran wrote “interdisciplinary study represents, above all, a denaturalization of knowledge: it means that people have to be permanently aware of the intellectual and institutional constraints within which they are working, and open to different ways of structuring and representing their understanding of the world.”¹⁴ This role of academic innovator and scholarly consciousness represents the best qualities interdisciplinarity has to offer.

This thesis is interdisciplinary in nature and fits into Moran’s mold of what interdisciplinarity should be. My work requires cooperative action between the use of oral history and historical context from the discipline of history with the reflexivity and theories of autoethnography. In this project, the disciplines are not only tools, but pathways that merge to become inquiry of the narratives around which my father and I constructed our lives. Insights from a core cluster of disciplines helped me in the researching and writing of my thesis. These

¹¹ *Interdisciplinarity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1-3.

¹² Moran, 181.

¹³ Robert Pippin, “Transdisciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, Reductive Disciplinarity, and Deep Disciplinarity,” Interdisciplinary Futures Symposium, November 8, 2013, Interdisciplinary Futures Symposium, Emory University, YouTube video, 45:10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X31J9gm1KXM>.

¹⁴ Moran, 181.

disciplines include history and the sub-discipline of oral history, sociology, and communication studies and the sub-discipline of autoethnography.

Historical research includes major events, but also interprets the larger cultural context of those events from multiple perspectives. Historical research supplied a background and an examination of the greater socio-cultural influences in the eras in which my father and I lived. The importance of the historical context of Carter County reflects my belief that the culture in which my father and I were brought up has been created and conditioned by the historical events, trends, and evolution of the county and its changing “values” or what it claims are its values, and that these have contributed to “creating” my father and myself. Where we lived shaped us; the times we lived through shaped us, the culture informed our behavior and beliefs.

Oral history is the preservation of one person’s viewpoint of a time or event that is recorded aurally, recorded visually, and/or transcribed. Oral history, especially as practiced by scholars who interviewed the dispossessed, taught me to understand my participants as un-voiced and to have empathy with them. In the case of my father, the techniques of oral history helped me to see him not as only my father, but as a human with all the accompanying hopes, dreams, and regrets. Because of the research methods of oral history, I was able enter into the interview with my father as a sympatric researcher.

Similarly, insights from psychology and sociology on stigma, for example, have helped me to understand my father and perhaps to frame his life differently than if I knew nothing of stigma. I think my father framed his life as a response to stigma. I cannot know that for certain, of course, but what I know about stigma allows me to pose the question and suggest explanations.

Autoethnography is an interdisciplinary endeavor that draws from self-reflection and writing from personal experience to connect to wider cultural meaning. Autoethnography developed from sociological inquiry to examine the role and influence of the researchers on and in their research. Although autoethnography grew out of the qualitative research of social scientists, I came to this method of inquiry through communication studies. I discuss autoethnography in greater detail in both Chapters 3 and 4.

CHAPTER 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

History matters. The noted historian Beverley Southgate wrote, in his discussion of new viewpoints in interpreting history as therapeutic, that history “can serve to put one’s own problems into larger chronological perspectives.”¹ Without understanding the larger cultural and geographical backgrounds of my narrative, the text loses layers of meaning. Carolyn Ellis defines autoethnography as “writing about the personal and its relationship to culture..”² One of those layers is the context in which the examined life was lived. Arthur Bochner asks the question “how shall we write about human experiences?”³ I write by understanding the whole person, including the cultural influences that contributed to the forming of the psyche of the individual. By situating my narrative efforts into a concrete time, place, and culture, and offering the context of the lives my father and I have lived, I intend to explain and analyze limitations and constraints, and opportunities taken, all of which shed light on certain aspects of the human condition.

Carter County, Tennessee

My father never changed his permanent residence from his Carter County address in the seventy-seven years of his life. I have lived, on and off, within the same seven acres of land my father made his home. Carter County, Tennessee, is the backdrop for my story. This locale is an unannounced character in our narratives that clearly shaped who my father and I became and how we decided to direct our lives. Without understanding the historical context provided by

¹ *What is History For?* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8, Google eBook.

² *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Lanham, MD: Rowman Altamira, 2004), 37.

³ “On First Person Narrative Scholarship: Autoethnography as Acts of Meaning,” *Narrative Inquiry* 22 no. 1. (January 2012): 158. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1075/ni.22.1.10boc>.

Carter County, readers cannot understand the weight of the subtext and the weight we may have felt as life-long residents.

Carter County was founded on April 9, 1796.⁴ Located in the northeast corner of Tennessee, Carter County encompasses approximately three-hundred forty-one square miles with a 2009 population of 59,043. The county borders North Carolina and the Blue Ridge Mountains on its southeastern border. The tallest point in Carter County is Roan Mountain, which stands six thousand two hundred eighty-five feet. Two major riverways are the Watauga and the Doe Rivers. Parts of the Cherokee National Forest encompass tracts of Carter County, including privately held land within the forest.⁵

Carter County was part of the white settler colonialism of the region during the eighteenth century in the years prior to Tennessee statehood. Protestant Christianity that displaced indigenous people came to characterize the county. Prior to European settler colonialists' transgression of settling native land, what became East Tennessee, including Carter County was home to a large population of Cherokee natives.⁶ County residents more than likely came to regard themselves as the indigenous people of the region, which is part of the colonial settler predominant narrative.⁷ The legacy of settler colonialism is the strong white, Christian identity of the county.

⁴ Tennessee became a state on June 1, 1796. Refer to Walter T. Durham, *Before Tennessee: the Southwest Territory, 1790-1796: a Narrative History of the Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio*. (Piney Flats, TN: Rocky Mount Historical Assn, 1990).

⁵ Frank Merritt, *Early History of Carter County: 1760-1861* (Greenville, SC: Southern Historical Press, 1950), 30; Cartercountyttn.gov, "Area Specs," retrieved June 23, 2020, <https://www.cartercountyttn.gov/about-carter-county/area-specs/>; Jennifer Bauer, *Roan Mountain: History of an Appalachian Treasure* (Charleston, SC: Natural History Press, 2011), 17.

⁶ On white "settlement," see Brenda Calloway, *America's First Western Frontier: East Tennessee* (Johnson City, TN: The Overmountain Press, 1989), 16-17; Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis*

⁷ Stephen Pearson, "'The Last Bastion of Colonialism': Appalachian Settler Colonialism and Self-Indigenization," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2013): 177-178. <https://doi.org/10.17953/aicr.37.2.g4522v766231r3xg>.

Carter County was at the heart of economic shortfalls. For most of the nineteenth century, small scale market agriculture, including agriculture during the antebellum period that used enslaved laborers, dominated the local economy.⁸ By the end of the nineteenth century, market agriculture was in decline and could not compete with the Midwest and emerging Plains states' agricultural economies. Though prospectors discovered iron ore and other mineral deposits, the mountainous terrain proved problematic for transportation of mined materials. Railroads that came into the area were financed by outside and often foreign investors. By the early twentieth century over all of Appalachia, absentee landowners and companies owned most of the timber and iron resources that flowed out of the area on the railways built in the latter half of the previous century.⁹

Industrialization: Rayon Plants and Economic Opportunities

By the post-World War II era, the major industry in Carter County was rayon production. Industrialization took the form of two plants, Bemberg and North American Rayon.¹⁰ American Bemberg, an affiliate of German based J. P. Bemberg, in turn affiliate of the world's largest rayon producers Vereinigte Glanzstoff Fabriken (VGF), began production in October 1926.¹¹ In August of 1928, VGF opened a second plant call American Glanzstoff¹² but later known as North American Rayon Corporation with employment at the two plants exceeded 3,000 workers

⁸ Merritt, *Early History of Carter County*, 201-206.

⁹ Tom Lee, *The Tennessee-Virginia Tri-Cities: Urbanization in Appalachia 1900-1950* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005),-25-27; 34-37; 14-15.

¹⁰ Frank Merritt, *Later History of Carter County: 1865-1980* (Carter County, TN: Homecoming '86 Heritage Project, 1986), 241-252.

¹¹ Marie Tedesco, "North American Rayon Corporation and American Bemberg Corporation," *Tennessee Encyclopedia* (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Society, 2017 October 8) accessed June 20, 2020.

<http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/north-american-rayon-corporation-and-american-bemberg-corporation/>.

¹² Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 246.

by the end of 1928.¹³ According to the 1930 census the population of Carter County was 29,223.¹⁴

During the 1930s and 1940s, the plants remained lucrative through stormy financial times. During the Great Depression, the plants remained profitable overall with the number of employees at a low of 2,491 in 1932 and peak of 4,500 in 1939.¹⁵ During World War II the plants produced rayon for parachute cloth. The office of Alien Property (OAP) seized control of the plants from 1942 to 1948, and after satisfactory negotiations with Dutch partners, sold the operations to Beaunit Mills. By 1949, the two plants employed about 6,000 workers.¹⁶

The operations at Bemberg and North American Rayon steadily declined from 1949. Due to decreased demand for rayon, economic factors, and industry shifts, by 1969 employment at the facilities was down to 3,550. In 1970, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found the Bemberg had been dumping toxic waste into the Watauga River after which Beaunit suspended all operations in December of that year. After changing owners twice, Bemberg filed for bankruptcy on February 16, 1974.¹⁷

North American Rayon, as a plant, remained operational until 2000. After the 1980s the company overcame the financial challenges of building a water treatment plant and labor negotiations to become an employee-owned company. The company contracted with National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to make, according to Tedesco, “carbonized rayon for the lining of the nozzles of the solid rocket motors that boost the space shuttle into

¹³ Marie Tedesco, “North American Rayon Corporation and American Bemberg Corporation,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia* (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Society, 2017 October 8), accessed June 20, 2020. <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/north-american-rayon-corporation-and-american-bemberg-corporation/>.

Tedesco, “North American Rayon Corporation and American Bemberg Corporation.”

¹⁴ Frank Merritt, *Later History of Carter County: 1865-1980* (Carter County, TN: Homecoming '86 Heritage Project, 1986, 241-252; Tedesco, “North American Rayon Corporation and American Bemberg Corporation.”

¹⁵ Tedesco, “North American Rayon Corporation and American Bemberg Corporation.”

¹⁶ Tedesco, “North American Rayon Corporation and American Bemberg Corporation.”

¹⁷ Tedesco, “North American Rayon Corporation and American Bemberg Corporation.”

orbit.” By 1996, employment at North American (now called NAR Polyester after being sold) numbered 700 workers.¹⁸

The North American Rayon plant shut down abruptly. Tedesco wrote “On February 25, 2000, an enormous fire broke out in the North American Rayon plant. It took firefighters a week to extinguish the flames. The plant immediately closed for business. A year later, in mid-February 2001, the North American Rayon plant was demolished, ending a significant era in the industrial history of Appalachian Tennessee.”¹⁹ With the closing of the plant, the industrial backbone of Carter County disappeared.

To a family of people of low economic means, the industries that Carter County hosted were lifelines to my father’s family. The rayon industry was especially important. My grandfather and two uncles worked in the rayon plants supporting the household of nine children. My father, having seen the toll that the work took on his family, refused to work there and left the mountains of Carter County for Washington, D.C., for two years in the 1960s. Until the rayon plants closed in the 1990s, I still had family working there.

Bemberg and North American were the backbone of my father’s and mother’s family livelihoods. Both my paternal and maternal grandfather worked at Bemberg, even though they never knew their children would one day marry. My paternal uncles worked at Bemberg with my grandfather. My father turned down the same job at seventeen years old when he was recommended by his typing teacher for a clerk position; my father typed 140 words per minute but they would only hire women as typists. My father held the distinct opinion that working on the plant floors was an intolerable situation through which he would not follow his father. My

¹⁸ Tedesco, “North American Rayon Corporation and American Bemberg Corporation.”

¹⁹ Tedesco, “North American Rayon Corporation and American Bemberg Corporation.”

cousin was working for NARC office when the fire occurred; the company relocated her to South Carolina.

Milligan College: Religion and Higher Education

A perusal of Merritt's histories reveals Carter County is filled with Protestant Christian churches of various denominations, but has only one Catholic Church, St. Elisabeth's. In fact, a sizable percentage of the news events in Merritt's histories are newspaper reports of church events, documentations of church changes, and church records. In these histories, my father is listed as an elder, the church clerk, and treasurer of his church, Oak Grove Christian, in 1990.²⁰ When I was growing up, my family attended Oak Grove Christian Church.

Oak Grove Christian Church is inexorably linked to Milligan College. The church was founded by, among others, Josephus Hopwood, who was also responsible for the higher education at Milligan College. Since its founding, Oak Grove provided a pulpit for nine ministers who all held deep associations with Milligan College.²¹ My father started his college career at Milligan but dropped out to work full time to support his parents. I graduated with my Bachelor of Arts from Milligan in 1993.

Milligan College, now Milligan University, is a private Christian liberal arts college with its own U. S. Post office, but found within the Elizabethton, Tennessee, city limits. Milligan is associated with the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ denomination. Located on the banks of Buffalo Creek, Milligan University serves as an educational and cultural center for the region. Although the county hosts satellite campuses for several state universities and community colleges, Milligan is still Carter County's original school of higher education.

²⁰ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 238.

²¹ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 237.

Founded in 1866 as a private secondary school called the Buffalo Male and Female Institute, the institution that would become Milligan College was founded by Rev. Wilson G. Barker.²² In 1881, under the leadership of Dr. Josephus Hopwood, who changed the name to Milligan College in honor of Hopwood's professor, the institution became a liberal arts college to train leaders for Disciples of Christ churches and the communities of Appalachia. Milligan has two national notes of interest. From 1943 to 1945, Milligan turned the campus over to the United States Navy for their pilot training program.²³ Milligan class of 1950 graduate Francis Gary Powers was piloting a U-2 spy plane over the Soviet Union on May 1, 1960, when a surface to air missile shot down his plane. Powers survived, to be tried and convicted of spying, and sentenced to three years in prison and another seven at hard labor. But two years later, he was released in exchange for US release of a convicted Soviet spy.²⁴

Carter County as Part of Appalachia

Carter County stands out in contradiction to most of southern Appalachia. Though there remained poverty, the presence of foreign owned rayon plants gave Carter County some economic shelter from the Great Depression. Historian Ronald Eller notes that by 1940, Appalachia "had experienced rapid expansion in jobs in the capacity to extract its natural resources, but growth had come with the development of an internal capacity to sustain prosperity. Throughout his recounting of Appalachian history, Eller described structural inequalities as a contributing factor in the creation and sustaining of poverty. A theme for Eller is that even though Appalachia was (is) a region with rich natural resources, absentee landowners,

²² Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 376.

²³ Merritt, *Later History of Carter County*, 376-380.

²⁴ "Francis Gary Powers," Milligan University, accessed June 20, 2020, <https://www.milligan.edu/francis-gary-powers/> and Department of State, Office of the Historian, "U-2 Overflights and the Capture of Francis Powers, 1960." <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/u2-incident>

both private and corporate, siphoned away the profits and taxes into other regions of the country, leaving no tax base from which infrastructure such as roads, public utilities, schools, and community outreach programs could arise.²⁵ With its rayon industry, Carter County provided the exception to the Appalachia's lack of industrialization.

Conclusion

By 1963, my father had returned to Carter County transferring from a clerk position with the Central Intelligence Agency in Washington, D.C. to a position at the Mountain Home Veterans Hospital in administration in Johnson City, Tennessee. During his formative years, neither he nor his family received any government aid, save for tobacco allotments. Neighbors offering hand-me-downs showed the Townsend family the only charity it knew. By the mid 1960s, my father briefly attended college, worked full time, and built a house on his family's land. Members of his family elevated their economic status through employment; all my aunts and uncles worked outside the home.

Carter County is a place of economic divides. A distinct line exists dividing those with opportunity through education or family fortune and those without economic means stuck in generational poverty. Carter County's Milligan University is a respected, private institution of higher learning, but few locals can afford its high tuition, so, many attend nearby East Tennessee State University, a state school with lower tuition. Milligan's student body is heavily populated by Midwestern U.S. students who return home upon graduation. The county is home to places of great scenic beauty and pockets of the worst of Appalachian stereotypes. Until the 1960s, my family fit in the lower economic strata, but by the time I was aware of economic status, we were middle class. My family has straddled both worlds.

²⁵ *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 11.

CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review consists of two parts. The first section reviews relevant literature on oral history. I used oral history methods in collecting the source interview. The second section focuses on aspects of autoethnography. The two connect in my project as source material and result. Oral history grounds my thesis in the original proposed study; autoethnography is the reflexive process with which I set the interview into the framework of the larger narrative I crafted.

Oral History

Oral history is a well-established method of preservation of historical perspectives. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson find oral history as “the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposed of historical reconstruction.” Oral history is both methodology and academic discipline, and oral history is interdisciplinary.¹ The focus of oral history is not only in collecting first-person accounts, but also in contextualizing the accounts into the larger socio-political and socio-economic perspectives of time.² Oral history embraced a shift in focus from traditional historical perspectives that focus on political and economic elites to the experiences of the “common” and marginalized individual. Paul Thompson wrote “Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and widens its scope.”³ With the focus shifting to individual lives, major cultural shifts and events are less of a timeline of “things important people did,” and more of a human tapestry of

¹ “Introduction,” *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 24; Nigel Cross and Rhiannon Barker, “The Sahel Oral History Project” in *The Oral History Reader*, 246.

² “The Voices of the Past,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 21-23; Ronald J. Grele, “Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 38.

³ Thompson, “The Voices of the Past,” 25-28.

experience. Alessandro Portelli wrote that oral history “tells us less about events than their meanings.”⁴ Time is the natural enemy of the historian and scholar relying on oral histories because time brings death, memory loss, and memory modification. Oral history examines and expresses the significance of the life lived.⁵

The preservation of history and culture is significant in the growth and development of a society. Interviewing that produced oral histories represented a compelling and invaluable research method. Perks and Thompson wrote that the gradual acceptance of oral history as useful and valid increased with the proliferation of portable recording devices and underpinned a revival of oral history after the Second World War.⁶ Historians and other researchers conducted oral history interviews of a wide range of persons. Allan Nevins used archival recordings of white politicians and diplomats (“Great Men”) and George Ewart Hart’s focused his work on working class individuals. Alex Haley and Studs Terkel are writers, not historians, who made oral history accounts viable consumer commodities.⁷

The relevance of oral history ties to its critique of the positivist approach to historical research. The positivist approach to history links at its origins to the work of Leopold von Ranke in the middle to late nineteenth century. Ranke developed a view of history as an unchanging timeline of facts that withstood objective scholarly scrutiny. For positivists, history is an impartial, clinical, and unchanging look at past events.⁸ Oral history takes an opposite view and

⁴ “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 67

⁵ Murphy, 159; Alice M. Hoffman, “Reliability and Validity in Oral History” *Communication Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1974): 23-27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463377409369125>; John Murphy, “The Voice of Memory: History, Autobiography and Oral Memory,” *Historical Studies* 22 no. 87 (1986): 157-175.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10314618608595742>; Alistair Thomson, “Fifty Years On: An International Perspective on Oral History,” *The Journal of American History* 85 no. 2 (1998): 581-595, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2567753>.

⁶ Perks and Thomson, “Introduction” in *The Oral History Reader*, 1.

⁷ Michael Frisch, “Oral History and Hard Times,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 29-32.

⁸ Leopold Von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History: Edited with an Introduction by Georg G. Iggers* (New York: Routledge, 2010), xi-xii.

helps historians interpret history from a more subjective and interpretative view.

By the late 1970s, some academics, including feminist scholars and activists across the globe, viewed oral history as a legitimate method of inquiry. Indeed, feminist history and oral history formed a “symbiotic connection,” according to Perks and Thompson.⁹ Yet historian John M. Glen claims that though addressed by some activists and scholars, who beginning in the 1960s proposed a history from the perspective of those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder, a majority of researchers until the late 1980s and early 1990s used oral history to reinforce national or conservative views of poverty and those affected most by it.¹⁰ Feminists who later developed standpoint theory relied on interviews to allow the marginalized to speak and to be recognized.¹¹ Feminist scholars realized that a positivist view of history left focus on the oppressors who wrote the history instead of women and other marginalized groups, whom positivists considered the “objects” of study. The switch in focus from a perceived history that focused only on the dominant cultural aspects allowed feminists to challenge the predominant narrative.¹²

Some academics and historians have leveled criticisms about the validity of oral history as a reliable method of documenting history. Robert Grele, for example, concluded that among professional historians there exists “evidence of skepticism and trust” of oral history as “a not a respected practice,” because the method inserts the researcher and the researcher’s bias into a project.¹³ Criticisms aimed at Terkel’s *Hard Times* include: Terkel was not a historian but a radio interviewer so his interviews are neither archival nor informational and bypass historical interpretation. Oral history of the Studs Terkel variety received criticism from positivist

⁹ Perks and Thomson, 4- 5.

¹⁰ John M. Glen, "The War on Poverty in Appalachia: Oral History from the “Top Down” and the “Bottom Up,”” *The Oral History Review* 22, no. 1 (1995): 80-83. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/22.1.67>.

¹¹ West and Turner, 515.

¹² Catherine Hall, "Politics, Post-structuralism and Feminist History," *Gender & History* 3, no. 2 (1991): 207-209. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.1991.tb00125.x>.

¹³ Grele, 38-39.

historians who thought only research in historical archival documents merited consideration.¹⁴

Many critics allude to the fear that rational thought could be dismissed altogether if oral history is fully accepted as an authentic method of historical inquiry.¹⁵

Leftists and those who favored documenting workers' lives, preferred oral history. Staughton Lynd wrote that he "and other New Left historians called for history to be written from below, from the bottom up." He noted that history was often written about and by "Great White Men" and he recognized the need of a history of "the inarticulate." What this signifies is that oral history may not necessarily represent history from the bottom up or from below and that historians need to "go to the people."¹⁶ Jesse Lemisch, a New Left historian, wrote

No contention about the people on the bottom of a society-neither that they are rebellious nor docile, neither that they defer to an authority whose legitimacy they accept nor that they curse an authority which they deem illegitimate, neither that they are noble nor that they are base no such contention even approaches being proved until we have in fact attempted a history of the inarticulate.¹⁷

Lemisch made the point that by stereotyping the masses and ignoring their point of view of the circumstances in which they lived, scholars are missing the point of history itself. Lemisch noted "the historian who would make his discipline a more rigorous one should have as his *working assumption* [italics original] that human actions are generally purposeful and are related to some system of values as well as needs." All human action, Lemisch continued, works to a greater purpose that historians who work on the lives of "great men" often miss.¹⁸

The collecting of oral histories in Appalachia is an ongoing endeavor. Since the early

¹⁴ Frisch, 32-33.

¹⁵ Portelli, 64.

¹⁶ Staughton Lynd, "Oral History from Below," *The Oral History Review* 21, no. 1 (1993): 1. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/21.1.1>.

¹⁷ Jesse Lemisch, "Listening to the 'Inarticulate': William Widger's Dream and the Loyalties of American Revolutionary Seamen in British Prisons," *Journal of Social History* (1969): 2. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3786643>.

¹⁸ Lemisch, 3.

1960s, the number of oral histories collected in Appalachia has been increasing. A wide swath of subjects has been presented using oral histories. The interest in Appalachian oral history in part stems from a combination of history from the bottom up and standpoint theory's application to residents of Appalachia as a dispossessed population in need of study.

Historians and researchers have used the collection of oral histories to examine Appalachia. John M. Glen examined oral histories about economic conditions of the Appalachian region's and the war on poverty. Through his work, Glen examined how oral history reorients authority to the individual, rather than outside interpreters.¹⁹ Other researchers have collected oral histories on Appalachian stereotypes and their effects on the identities of the residents.²⁰ In my research, I set out to capture my father's accounts that I hoped would run contrary to traditional mountaineer and hillbilly stereotypes.

Research Focus Shift: From Oral History to Autoethnography

Oral history and autoethnography share several similarities. Both forms of inquiry appeared as counterpoint from a qualitative perspective responding to the positivistic academic disciplines from which they originated. Oral history and autoethnography account for researchers' influence on their research. Autoethnography and oral history consider the individual as a separate and unique being whose distinctive experiences may supply insight in a

¹⁹ Glen, "The War on Poverty in Appalachia," 67.

²⁰ For more information on dispelling stereotypes, see A Cooper, H. Gibbs Knotts and Katy L. Elders, "A Geography of Appalachian Identity." *Southeastern Geographer* 51, no. 3 (2011): 457. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26228971>; "Drudges, Helpers and Team Players: Oral Historical Accounts of Farm Work in Appalachian Kentucky 1." *Rural Sociology* 61, no. 2 (1996): 209. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.1996.tb00617.x>; Elvin Hatch, "Modernity with a Mountain Inflection." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* (2008): 145. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41446806>; Shaunna L. Scott, "Gender Among Appalachian Kentucky Farm Families: The Kentucky Farm Family Oral History Project and Beyond," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 2, no. 1 (1996): 103. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41446317>; Barbara Ellen Smith, "'Beyond the Mountains': The Paradox of Women's Place in Appalachian History," *NWSA Journal* 11 no 3 (Autumn1999): 1-17. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316678>; Laurel Shackelford ed. *Our Appalachia: An Oral History* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1988).

larger context. Moreover, critics of both forms of inquiry have offered similar critiques of both methods as non-academic and being too subjective. The qualitative nature of oral history and autoethnography means that positivistic researchers are not comfortable with research specific to an individual and not repeatable.

Autoethnography: Definition and Emergence

Definition of Autoethnography

Autoethnography, according to Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, is “an idea, a kind of research, a mode of writing, and a way of life.”²¹ As a term, auto refers to self-reflexivity; ethnography refers to a describing a culture or customs of a specific group of people. Together, these create a mode of examination based in narrative and calling for creative modes of interweaving that narrative with scholarly thought and criticism. Ellis defines autoethnography as “not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively.”²² The autoethnographic paradigm of research requires determination for inner journey on the part of the writer to create an expressively charged, an academically sound, and personally reflexive narrative.

Bochner and Ellis encourage autoethnographic researchers to use the process of writing to “navigate the landscape of lived experience.”²³ They encourage researchers to use autoethnography to combine their scholarly and personal lives. Shelly Hannigan agrees with Bochner and Ellis; she wrote that autoethnography “positioned [her] as an ‘actor’ and as ‘researcher/participant with the hermeneutic circle.”²⁴ Hannigan defines the hermeneutic circle

²¹ *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 43.

²² “Carrying the Torch for Autoethnography,” in *The Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (New York: Routledge, 2016), 10.

²³ *Evocative Autoethnography*, 10.

²⁴ “Narrative Inquiry and Auto-Ethnography: Interpretative Approaches to Research” (London: SAGE, 2014), 3.

as a way to dialogue with others in order to determine what people are communicating and regards “the researcher as an ‘actor’ rather than a distant entity.”²⁵ The reader joins the researcher and participants within the process of autoethnography. Hannigan’s added focus on the reader enhances the dynamic relationship between researcher, participant, and research.

Autoethnography represents a method of inquiry that draws on the emotional life of the researcher. Bochner posits “that social science writing could be usefully conceived as a material intervention into people’s lives, one that not only represents but also creates experience, putting meanings in motion.”²⁶ Autoethnography, for Bochner, is not just the result of the research experience, but an experience unto itself. In the same vein, Hannigan posits “The value of autoethnography as research is to inform us not just about selves but also about culture and society.”²⁷ Ellis wrote:

As an autobiographical genre of writing and research, autoethnography displays multiple layers of consciousness. Autoethnographers gaze back and forth. First, they look through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience. Next, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and the cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.²⁸

Emergence of Autoethnography

Autoethnography has its roots in the mixture of multiple academic disciplines.²⁹ These roots tie autoethnography’s interdisciplinary origins to ethnography, narrative inquiry, self-study,

²⁵ Hannigan, 3-4.

²⁶ “On First Person Narrative Scholarship: Autoethnography as Acts of Meaning,” *Narrative Inquiry* 22 no.1 (January ,2012), 157.

²⁷ Hannigan, 11.

²⁸ “Autoethnography,” in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012, 49.

²⁹ Sherick Hughes and Julie Pennington, “Autoethnography: Introduction and Overview,” in *Autoethnography: Process, Product, and Possibility for Critical Social Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2018) 5-7, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483398594.n1>. This article gives a detailed history of the development of autoethnography from the method’s varied origin to contemporary developments.

and hermeneutics. The timeline for the birth and growth of autoethnography traces back to the Society of Observers of Man through Robert Park's work at the University of Chicago in the early twentieth century.³⁰ Major contributors to the growth of the field in the past fifty years include David Hayano, Harold Goodall, Carolyn Ellis, and Ruth Behar to the field.³¹

Autoethnographic writing illuminates the writer, the culture, and the reader.

Autoethnographies, according to Tony Adams, Stacy Hollman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, are “stories told about ourselves through the lens of culture. Autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience.”³² Harold Goodall wrote that autoethnographers “are not researchers who learn to ‘write it up,’ but *writers* [original emphasis] who learn how to use their research and how they write to ‘get it down’”³³ Autoethnographic writings are “the storied performances of life experiences [that] move outward from the selves of the person and inward to the persons and groups that give them meaning and structure.”³⁴ Further, Mary Gergen and Kenneth Gergen posit:

Autoethnography represents a significant expansion in both ethnographic form and relational potential. In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing. One's unique voicing-complete with colloquialisms, reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness-is honored. In this way, the reader gains a sense of the writer as a full human being.³⁵

Autoethnography arose from the growth and maturation of qualitative research methods.

Andrew Herrmann traces the roots of qualitative research to European colonial expansion of the

³⁰ Hughes and Pennington, 7-8.

³¹ Hughes and Pennington, 11-12.

³² *Understanding Qualitative Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

³³ Harold Goodall, *Writing the New Ethnography* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2000), 10.

³⁴ Norman Denzin, *Interpretative Autoethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014), 4.

³⁵ “Ethnographic Representation as Relationship,” in *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*, ed. Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 14.

late nineteenth century, when imperial nations used ethnographic methods in \ to manage globally distanced outposts. By the late nineteenth century, Western institutions, as French philosopher Michel Foucault explains, became institutions of surveillance.³⁶ The needs of empire building, according to Herrmann, required methodology to track growing populations and economics. Colonizers also employed ethnographic techniques to study indigenous peoples, the result of which was not necessarily to add to the body of knowledge but for colonial masters to exert control over natives.³⁷ Ann Stoler agrees with the contention that imperialists and colonizers needed information about their subjects in order to control them and wrote that colonizers in the late nineteenth century needed information about their subjects, the sub-alterns whom the colonial masters had to control. Archival records, Stoler claims, reflected the epistemic anxieties of colonizers who recorded activities of the colonized only as those activities benefitted or threatened colonial rule.³⁸ In the United States, later nineteenth century ethnographers, such as Lewis Henry Morgan, observed and wrote on the Iroquois from the same colonial perspective.³⁹

Ethnographic inquiry took a leap forward with the University of Chicago during the early twentieth century. Autoethnography can be traced directly back to the First and Second Chicago Schools' advancements in research in the fields of ethnomethodology, phenomenology, and sociology.⁴⁰ The Chicago Schools posited a focus on a model of human development and

³⁶ *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1991 (1977)), 204-205.

³⁷ "The Historical and Hysterical Narratives of Organization and Autoethnography," in *Handbook of Organizational Autoethnography* (Routledge: New York, 2020), 14. Herrmann extensively traces the facts and myths of qualitative inquiry and ethnography in this piece.

³⁸ *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 32-34, Google eBook.

³⁹ Jack Campisi, "The Iroquois and the Euro-American Concept of Tribe," *New York History* 63, no. 2 (1982): 178-179. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23173116>.

⁴⁰ Patricia A Adler and Peter Adler, *Membership Roles in Field Research* Vol. 6 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1987), 8-12.

behavior as “shaped by social structures and physical environmental factors, rather than genetic and personal characteristics.”⁴¹ The First Chicago School, best known for urban sociology and the development of the symbolic interactionist methodological approach, took significant steps forward in philosophy and social inquiry, including emphasizing reflexivity on the part of sociological researchers. Major scholars associated with the First Chicago School included Robert E. Park, E. Franklin Frazier, Nels Anderson, Ruth Shonle Cavan, Everett Hughes, George Herbert Mead, Walter C. Reckless, and Florian Znaniecki.⁴² Herrmann wrote, “For the Chicago School, ethnographic research and naturalistic observation was necessary for the study of social phenomena in depth and vividness.”⁴³ Naturalistic observation in method strives for watching subjects in their “natural state” with minimal intrusion from the researcher. Participant observation focuses on the researcher becoming familiar and close with a group of individuals. Although ethnographic research had not completely moved away from its colonial roots, the First Chicago School’s (1917-1942) studies tended to be more self-reflexive than later work in the Second Chicago School (1945-1960). Scholars associated with the Second Chicago School included Howard Becker, Joseph Gusfield, Herbert Blumer, David Riesman, and Erving Goffman. The Second School focused on social deviance, race and ethnicity, urban life, and collective behavior, and returned to participant observation as method.⁴⁴

According to Stacy Hollman Jones, Tony Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, “A greater appreciation for qualitative research and a growing acceptance of qualitative methods thus provided a way for scholars to answer questions about the nature of reality, knowledge, action,

⁴¹ Barley, 48.

⁴² For information on these scholars, see Stephen R. Barley, “Career, Identities, and Institutions: The Legacy of the Chicago School of Sociology,” in *Handbook of Career Theory*, ed. Michael Bernard Arthur, Douglas T. Hall, and Barbara S. Lawrence (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 41-43, Google eBook.

⁴³ Herrmann, “The Historical and Hysterical Narratives of Organization and Autoethnography,” 14.

⁴⁴ Herrmann, “The Historical and Hysterical Narratives of Organization and Autoethnography,” 15-16.

and values that were generated in response to developments and events in human history.”⁴⁵

The later twentieth century saw the rise of some qualitative scholarship, notably from Erving Goffman, Barney Glaser, Anselm Strauss, Paula Brown, and Clovis Shepherd.⁴⁶ One factor in the persistence of qualitative inquiry in the mid and late twentieth century was a direct response to the atrocities of World War II, in particular the genocide of the Holocaust; qualitative methods humanized the atrocities of the war and gave victims ways in which to not only process the horrors but preserve their experiences for the historical record.⁴⁷ The push for quantitative research that dominated the mid-twentieth century led to a “crisis of confidence” inspired by postmodernism in the 1980s, which, according to Herrmann, introduced “new and abundant opportunities to reform social science and reconceive the objectives and forms of social science inquiry.”⁴⁸

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner trace the emergence of autoethnography to discontent with the state of academics in the 1970s. They wrote, “scholars became increasingly troubled by social science's ontological, epistemological, and axiological limitations.”⁴⁹ In other words, the criteria that social scientists used to measure their studies were problematic in that researchers may have accurately derived results from relevant data, but neither the data nor the results conveyed the full meaning of narratives, which were rich and complex. The method and term “auto-ethnography” first appeared in the 1970s in what Bochner described as the “*narrative*

⁴⁵“Introduction,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Routledge: New York, 2016), 25-26.

⁴⁶ Herrmann, “The Historical and Hysterical Narratives of Organization and Autoethnography,” 18

⁴⁷ “Introduction: Coming to Know Autoethnography,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Routledge: New York, 2016), 26.

⁴⁸ Herrmann, “The Historical and Hysterical Narratives of Organization and Autoethnography,” 19-20; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 273.

⁴⁹ “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (2011): 273-274. 27. www.jstor.org/stable/23032294.

turn[original emphasis] provoked by postculturalist, postmodernist, and feminist critics.”⁵⁰

Feminists and postcolonial scholars criticized research methods based on data that did not account for the humane or account for researchers’ roles in or influence on their research findings. In 1975, Karl Heider referred to students’ narrative work in his research as “autoethnography.”⁵¹ David Hayano use the term “auto-ethnography” to describe the self-analysis of anthropologists in the 1979, referencing Heider’s work.⁵²

Qualitative researchers in the 1980s and 1990s continued to explore autoethnography. Patricia Adler and Peter Adler described how researchers should value and document their own experiences and emotions in relation to their research. Ellis and Bochner in the 1990s identified the growth in reflexivity in research and collated different terms to describe this introspection for the researcher, including but not limited to narratives of the self, self-stories, critical autobiography, confessional tales, and autobiographical ethnography. Since the 1990s, the field has continued to evolve in wider disciplines; autoethnographers come to this form of inquiry from all walks of academic life, including sociology communication studies, health studies, fine arts, history, and psychology.⁵³

Autoethnography’s Critics

Autoethnography has drawn criticism. Bochner and Ellis noted that “the shift to an autoethnographic paradigm . . . unnerved those traditional, analytic social scientists who insisted on clinging to objectivity, detachment, theory building, and generalization as terminal goals of

⁵⁰“Putting Meaning into Motion: Autoethnography’s Existential Calling,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography* eds. Stacy Hollman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (New York: Routledge, 2016) 53

⁵¹ Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 47.

⁵² Katrina Douglas and David Carless, “A History of Autoethnographic Inquiry,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacy Hollman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (New York: Routledge, 2016) 92; Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 84.

⁵³ Douglas and Carless, 92-98.

scientific inquiry. They perceived autoethnography as a threat to the domination of their cultural practices.”⁵⁴ Autoethnography is not a repeatable experiment process. Herrmann observed “critics complain that autoethnography is not rigorous, because it is not based on experimental design.”⁵⁵ Other scholars agree. Denzin wrote “Autoethnography has been criticized for being nonanalytic, self-indulgent, irreverent, sentimental, and romantic.” Denzin continued:

Autoethnography has been criticized for being too artful. It has been criticized for not being scientific, for having no theory, no concepts, no hypothesis. It has been criticized for not being sufficiently artful. It has been dismissed for not being sufficiently rigorous, theoretical or analytical. Critics contend that a solitary case only tells one story; narrative inquiry is not scientific inquiry.

Denzin goes on to discuss the other criticisms of autoethnography as navel gazing, biased, self-absorbed, lacking reliability, generalizability, and validity. He suggests that these criticisms come from a positivist framework. Positivism suggests that there are concrete results to research that can be scientifically tested and proven, that the results are repeatable, and so leave no room for the cornucopia of individual emotion and experience provided by narrative and reflexive research.⁵⁶

Critics have found fault with autoethnography as irrelevant to scholarly pursuits. Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont argued that “the unreflective and uncritical use of narratives is complicit in the forms of social life that the social scientist ought to be investigating” and that the first-person narrative is a societal trend that academics and researchers should push back against.

⁵⁷ Atkinson and Delamont wrote:

[narrative has] been celebrated and advocated as acts of cultural resistance on the part of the marginal, as a performative act of the dispossessed and the muted. The influence of women’s studies, black studies, gay and lesbian studies, and other movements to provide

⁵⁴ Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 45.

⁵⁵ Herrmann, “The Historical and Hysterical Narratives of Organization and Autoethnography,” 26.

⁵⁶ Denzin, *Interpretative Autoethnography*, 69-72.

⁵⁷ “Rescuing Narrative from Qualitative Research,” *Narrative Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (2006), 166.

<https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.16.1.21atk>.

intellectual space in academic disciplines for those previously regarded as the objects of study or as an ignored subaltern class or a deviance object for social control, has also led to a growth of narratives.⁵⁸

They recommend methodological skepticism that these narrative forms are consistent and able to meet scientific scrutiny. The argument can be encapsulated to some degree in the following statement:

Since we do not believe that any account simply mirrors some antecedent reality, but helps to create that very reality itself, we also believe that such performances cannot be held to give privileged access to a political ‘truth.’ As social scientists, we believe that we must sustain a commitment to an analytic stance, and not a celebratory one. We need, therefore, to keep a degree of distance from the narrative materials we collect, analyze and reproduce. In our view, the political engagement of some authors should not become an excuse for the uncritical celebration of kinds and sources of social acts, nor for the abandonment of obligations to treat them as social ‘facts’ susceptible to sustained analytic inspection.⁵⁹

Atkinson’s and Delamont’s criticism of narrative inquiry highlights the danger that researchers can become so introspective that they are no longer writing reflexively but they are crafting memoir or creative fiction. Their argument alludes to the of social construction of knowledge. During the 1960s, Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, set forth an analysis of the process of paradigm change in selected scientific disciplines (e.g. biological science, astronomy, chemistry) by analyzing the social construction of knowledge in these fields and the ways in which such social construction limited inquiry in those fields and, by implication, other scientific fields.⁶⁰ Changes in thought (social, religious, philosophical, for example) opened minds to what could be asked and led down a path to revolution—and change; basically, he attacked the positivist approach and idea.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Atkinson and Delamont, 167-168.

⁵⁹ Atkinson and Delamont, 168-169

⁶⁰ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 35-42.

⁶¹ Kuhn, 135-153.

Conclusion

Autoethnography is a bridge-building technique that can make academic writing accessible to non-academics. Bochner in *The Handbook of Autoethnography* wrote,

As a form of writing, and communicating, autoethnography has become a rallying point for those who believe that the human sciences need to become more human . . . Autoethnography is an expression of the desire to turn social science inquiry into a non-alienating practice, one in which I (as a researcher) do not need to suppress my own subjectivity, where I can become more attuned to the subjectively felt experiences of others, where I am free to reflect on the consequences of my work, not only for others but also for myself.⁶²

If more academics can learn when to adjust their writing to be appreciated by the larger public, academia could expand its reach and appeal beyond a narrow scholarly audience.

Autoethnography, when done well, can transcend academic scrutiny to become poetry, art, or even film. While these goals may fall beyond the reach of this project, I intended to make a small contribution to the field of autoethnography with this work.

⁶² Bochner, "Putting Meaning into Motion," 53.

CHAPTER 4. METHODS

I divided this chapter into two parts. The first part encompasses the study as it was originally intended. Following that is a brief description of how the focus and format of the study evolved from oral history and performance to autoethnography. Even though autoethnographic research rarely includes a formal methods section, for this project, it supplies context for the interview that formed the basis of the autoethnography.

Part One: The Proposed Study

Basic electric and water services are assumed amenities in most areas of the United States. Sanitary water is a basic need for human life. Lack of access to electricity is almost always addressed as a problem of the Global South.¹ According to data from the World Bank, in 2018, one hundred percent of Americans in the United States had access to electricity; whether these people can afford to have electric wiring installed or not is a different issue.² The number of homes without access to running water in the United States, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, is lower each census. More than two million people currently living in the U.S. lack access to running water.³ Some residents of Appalachia, specifically East Tennessee, southwestern Virginia, and southeastern Kentucky, remember these basic utility services being installed and are able to compare life before and after running water and electricity came to their homes.

¹ See, for example: Subhes C. Bhattacharyya, "Energy Access Problem of the Poor in India: Is Rural Electrification a Remedy?" *Energy Policy* 34, no. 18 (2006): 3387-3397 and Yemane Wolde-Rufael, "Electricity Consumption and Economic Growth: A Time Series Experience for 17 African Countries." *Energy Policy* 34, no. 10 (2006).

² "Access to Electricity" (2017). [http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.ACCS.ZS?page=](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.ACCS.ZS?page=;); "Historical Census Of Housing Graphs Water Supply" (2020), <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/census/historic/swgraph.html>.

³ Laurel Morales, "Many Native Americans Can't Get Clean Water, Report Finds," *Morning Edition*, (November 18, 2019), retrieved from <https://www.kcrw.com/news/shows/morning-edition/npr-story/779821510>.

How does an individual's relationship with self and community change after the interjection of public utilities into their lives? To examine that question, I proposed a study of an oral history of Appalachian residents, specifically residents of northeastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, and southwestern Virginia, who had experienced daily routines both without installed utilities, such as running water, electricity, and/or land-line telephone and with access to these utilities once the services were installed. According to Kathryn Roulston, researchers identify oral history interviews with several terms simultaneously, including life story, biography, personal narrative, and memoir.⁴ In particular, I planned to interview the surviving members of my father's family, who until the early 1970s had lived in East Tennessee without public utilities. The participants would be asked to remember their life prior to and after receiving public utility services and encouraged to share anecdotes and stories contrasting their lives prior to and after receiving public utilities. Following the study, I intended to develop the interviews into a performance ethnographic storytelling/theatrical presentation.

The interview with my father was to be the first of eight interviews with individuals with similar experiences to life without utilities. After conducting all interviews, I intended to examine data, analyze the interviews using relevant theory, and develop results. However, after conducting and scheduling interviews, my other participants withdrew from my research project. My father gave me permission to use his interview. Before I could conduct follow up interviews, my father unexpectedly died. The one interview my father gave me was became the single point of my study.

⁴ *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010.), 23.

The Single Interview

On April 6, 2019, I conducted an oral interview with Billy T. Townsend, my father. Mr. Townsend lived on the same fifteen acres of farmland for 77 years. His fifty-year old home, which he constructed mostly by himself, stands a few hundred yards from the abandoned house where he was born. His childhood home had a Works Project Administration (WPA) cistern and hand pump just outside the remnants of a kitchen door; a long absent outhouse is no longer visible. This older house is the one he moved his parents out of in 1966 and into his current home where, for the first time, his mother and father lived in a house with indoor plumbing and a private telephone line.

Prior to the interview, I supplied Mr. Townsend the questions I was to ask.⁵ To record video of the interview, I used an iPad pro on a tripod for video and audio back up. To record audio of the interview, I connected an M-Audio Producer microphone to a MacBook Pro using the QuickTime program to record audio only. The recording equipment, in retrospect, created a physical barrier between the participant and the interviewer in both the physical location of the equipment acting as a wall and as a psychological barrier: I will comment further on the interview in Chapter 5.

I entered the living room and the participant directed me to where he wanted to me to set up and where he wanted to sit. His wife of forty-nine years, my mother, sat in a recliner to observe the interview. During set-up of the recording equipment, Mr. Townsend expressed concern about being videotaped due to his appearance. After about fifteen minutes of technical difficulty, I was able to have all the equipment working properly.

⁵ The questions can be found in the appendix.

I asked Mr. Townsend to remember his life prior to and after receiving public utility services. Out of those questions, I intended a conversation to organically blossom allowing the participant's stories time to appear. After asking the first question, Mr. Townsend asked to forgo the questions in lieu of a prepared narrative. I consented without offering an alternative.

The participant continued without prompt for twenty minutes, recounting his life story. I nodded and kept eye contact as much as possible. I talked with the participant for a total of twenty-seven minutes and twenty seconds.⁶ Post interview, the participant moved from his chosen location to his armchair where he casually sits in the room. Once there, recording devices powered down, he began to recount stories and talked off the cuff – and off the record – for an added forty-five minutes. I did not take notes as I was breaking down equipment and was oblivious at the time of the significance.

The interview with my father was to be the first of eight interviews with individuals with similar experiences to life without utilities. After conducting all interviews, I intended to examine data, analyze the interviews using relevant theory, and develop results. Following the interview, I transcribed the interview and saved it using Microsoft Word.

The interview as it unfolded, not as I intended it to proceed, is a life history account. Life history (LH) is one type of oral history interview. A life history is a narrative in which the interviewees relate their life history from birth to their present. One conducted a LH interview with one person only. Life history research often included several interviews conducted over a period of time.⁷

⁶ Roulston, *Reflective Interviewing*, 21-23.

⁷ Roulston, *Reflective Interviewing*, 25-26.

Part Two: From Oral History to Autoethnography

With all other participants opting out of their interviews, my mentor encouraged me to write an autoethnography to explore my father's and my narratives in the creation of how we related to each other and the world. Hughes and Pennington catalog methods of inquiry that are considered, depending on the scholar, to be autoethnography, for example, analytic autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, community autoethnographies, critical performance autoethnography, layered accounts, and reflexive ethnographies.⁸

For my autoethnographic project, I chose to use evocative autoethnography. Evocative autoethnography speaks simultaneously to mind, heart, and spirit. Autoethnography allows me the freedom to use all my voices from inner monologue to storyteller to academic, as well as those of others whose words I co-opt to illuminate my narrative. Evocative autoethnography and layered accounts speak most to my nature as a writer.

Evocative autoethnography methodology follows that of composing a narrative, with characters, plot, and conclusion. Plot becomes the major claim and, according to Bochner and Ellis, plot gives the work "meaning."⁹ Key features of evocative autoethnography are similar to features in other creative writing, including setting, time, drama, trouble/conflict, and action.¹⁰ Evocative autoethnography differs from other academic writing in that the researcher writes about people depicted as characters within a specific context and specific time frame in which there is dramatic tension and some sort of resolution, including a moral or higher meaning.¹¹ A key component of evocative autoethnography for me was Bochner and Ellis's advice to write

⁸ Hughes and Pennington, 17-23. Hughes and Pennington offer a comprehensive list of the types of autoethnography.

⁹ Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 116.

¹⁰ Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 87.

¹¹ Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 88.

about what you like.¹² The tools of evocative autoethnography allowed me the ability to express the deep emotions that I have for and about my father, while also being able to treat the accounts as “stories” in which I was writing about characters, not necessarily myself. I achieved a balance of emotional honesty and emotional distance.

¹² Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*, 118.

CHAPTER 5. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY:

BILLY AND ME: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF MY FATHER AND HIS SON

*Last night I dreamed that I was a child
Out where the pines grow wild and tall
I was trying to make it home through the forest
Before the darkness falls*

*I heard the wind rustling through the trees
And ghostly voices rose from the fields
I ran with my heart pounding down that broken path
With the devil snapping at my heels*

*I broke through the trees and there in the night
My father's house stood shining hard and bright
The branches and brambles tore my clothes and scratched my arms
But I ran till I fell shaking in his arms*

*I awoke and I imagined the hard things that pulled us apart
Will never again, sir, tear us from each other's hearts
I got dressed and to that house I did ride
From out on the road I could see its windows shining in light*

*I walked up the steps and stood on the porch
A woman I didn't recognize came and spoke to me through a chained door
I told her my story and who I'd come for
She said "I'm sorry son but no one by that name lives here anymore"*

*My father's house shines hard and bright
It stands like a beacon calling me in the night
Calling and calling so cold and alone
Shining 'cross this dark highway where our sins lie unatoned¹*

Prologue: Narrative Inheritance

In my autoethnographical collection of stories which follow, I offer an emotionally ineloquent and messy interpretation of my father's narratives about himself and of my narratives

¹ Bruce Springsteen, vocalist, "My Father's House," by Bruce Springsteen, recorded January 3, 1982, track 4 on side 2 on *Nebraska*, Columbia Records, 33 1/3 rpm.

about our relationship. I examined how the narratives compare to and contrast from each other. As part of this examination, I contextualized the narrative of his life that he crafted to be his legacy; I crafted my own narrative; I analyzed both our narratives; I recreated the bliss and the Sisyphean feat of being my father's progeny. In examining my narrative inheritance that I have gained, and addressing my narrative inheritance that remains hidden, I highlighted the significance in all human lives the importance of understanding the stories we use to create our lives. I also desired the reader to realize that our narrative inheritance can be lost before we are ready to examine its origins.

Narrative inheritance can be both a positive influence and a damaging force. Harold Goodall wrote that "What we inherit narratively from our forebears provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs."² The stories by which my father lived his life made me the man I am, for both better and worse. Narratives that we live by and tell ourselves, as communication, are stories in which we live. Humans exist or "live" in communication; reality is a co-created human construct; interpersonal and personal meanings shape communication.³ These inherited narratives shape not only my life, but also the lives of my partner and children.

My goal in shaping (and in some cases, reshaping) these stories is to examine my narrative inheritance so I can begin to evaluate those narratives by which I choose to live, those I chose to reject, and those which I choose to pass on. By analyzing my narrative inheritance, I can, borrowing from Goodall, that I can become aware of my "life grammar" so as to except or

²"Narrative Inheritance: A Nuclear Family With Toxic Secrets," *Qualitative Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (2005): 497. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077800405276769>.

³ Richard West and Lynn H. Turner, *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application Fifth Edition*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014), 83-103. The full discussion of CMM and HM can be found on pages 83 to 103 of West and Turner.

reject the stories of how my family lived and about where I came from and about how I was raised in a meaningful context. story how [my family] lived and thought about things, and it allows [me] to explain to others where [I] come from and how [I was] raised in the continuing context of what it all means.”⁴ I want to repurpose the negative stories within which I have been living and edify the life narratives that serve me and mine well. My father and I became the focus of my attention in creating a story from which I can move forward and from which my reader can develop a deeper understanding of intergenerational stories and their importance.

Music is essential to my writing. Music for me is an essential part of my life as expression of thought and emotion from which I borrow other artists words and melodies to help expand personal understanding of my inner life. Layered into my accounts, I have included lyrics from songs to illuminate and inform the text, sometimes in juxtaposition to the original intent, sometimes for a sense of irony, sometimes to encourage a heightened emotional response from my readers. Music moves me/my work and music informs my work.

In writing my autoethnography, at some points, I place analysis at the end of my stories. I write in first, second, and third person. At some points, I do not end with analysis but let the story end, leaving the emotions it conveyed in the air and move onto the next story. At some points, I want to drop the mic. The stories are the beginning steps in creating a tapestry of narrative I am weaving as I try to live reflexively. In sharing with you, my reader, these personal stories of tribulations and triumphs, I hope you find kernels of larger truths about the human experience.

I begin at the end of my father’s story in March of 2020. The journey you are on with me is not easy to chronicle and may be uncomfortable at points for you to read. Whether the material

⁴ Goodall, “Narrative Inheritance,” 497.

is grim, grotesque, or celebratory, I try to situate my readers into an emotional state like mine during the events I retell. My father and I, as historically many fathers and sons, had at times a wonderful, at times convoluted, and at times spiritually and physically destructive relationship.

Here is what I need you to understand about my father: my father loved his family. His ultimate show of love was utilitarian – to make sure that we had a house, food, something to wear. These quiet, practical gestures of love may come in the form of trips to JC Penney’s for school clothes, making sure he put out an acre of vegetable garden every summer, going to work every day. He was human, every bit. And, he desperately wanted to be a good man, no matter his flaws.

Before I began this dive into a shared past, a search for identities, and implications to the parties involved, my mother looked at me and said, “Be truthful. Be honest.” Truth and honesty are not the same thing, and both are tricky shapeshifters. Both rely on my memory (and theirs, when I ask them). But memory is fluid and humans edit their memories as time passes. Derek Edwards wrote that “emotions are often defined . . . in contrast to cognition and rational thought,” that emotions are perceived to be “natural bodily experiences and expressions, older than language, irrational and subjective, unconscious rather than deliberate, genuine rather than artificial, feelings rather than thoughts.”⁵ This work is my attempt to take my emotional, unconscious narratives and layer them with rational thought within the context of the literal few acres that both of us called home in Carter County, Tennessee.

A Sunday Morning in March 2020

*Whether you're a brother or whether you're a mother
You're stayin' alive, stayin' alive
Feel the city breakin' and everybody shakin'
And we're stayin' alive, stayin' alive*

⁵ Derek Edwards, “Emotion Discourse,” *Culture & Psychology* 5 no. 3 (1999): 272-273.

Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive, stayin' alive
*Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive*⁶

Pressing down as I count: One, two, three, four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five!

Ten seconds passed/past.

On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five!

Twenty seconds passed/past.

On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five!

I'm alone. My mother and sister took their turns and left the room. I don't know where they went. I assume they're outside looking for the EMTs with Kallie. "I wish they were in here."

On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five!

Until eternity has passed.

On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five!

My back is killing me; what was flop sweat has become actual sweat dripping onto his chest. Can't stop.

⁶ Bee Gees, vocalists, "Stayin' Alive" by Bee Gees, recorded 1977, track 1 on side 1 (two lps) on *Saturday Night Fever*, RSO Records, 33 1/3 rpm.

On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! On the inhale, one, two, on the exhale, three four, five! FOR GODSAKE, BREATHE! I can't quit looking at his foot and its blue or gray, oh GOD!

Can't panic. Got to stay in control. Can't. Lose. Control.

*Whether you're a brother or whether you're a mother
You're stayin' alive, stayin' alive
Feel the city breakin' and everybody shakin'
And we're stayin' alive, stayin' alive
Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive, stayin' alive
Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive⁷*

This is the film and the soundtrack that filled my headspace since the moment I knelt to start CPR on my father. The quagmire of these short few minutes until the first responders arrived to relieve me, ensnared me. Having burst through the house door scant seconds earlier, I ran into my father's bedroom to find him face down in the floor, his shoulder wedged into the bathroom door frame, his face on the carpet, my mother standing to the side with panic in her voice, his motorized wheelchair shoved to the foot of the bed. I call 9-1-1 on speaker phone. My sister is leaning over my father's broad back shouting for me to help turn him over; his arm is bending in an awkward position as I struggle to get it out from under him while my sister rolls him on his side. My sister and mother are starting CPR. My sister asks me to take over. I can't quit looking at his foot: it's blue. I know in the intuitive places that he is already gone. The earlier times I had rushed over and he had fallen or passed out were only the rehearsals; this was the dance. My father's heartbeat now existed only to follow the rhythm of my hands pressing down on his sternum. CPR training said to sing Stayin' Alive in my head, press to the beat.

*Whether you're a brother or whether you're a mother
You're stayin' alive, stayin' alive
Feel the city breakin' and everybody shakin'
And we're stayin' alive, stayin' alive*

⁷ Bee Gees, "Stayin' Alive."

Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive, stayin' alive
*Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive*⁸

I knew inside I was not making an ounce of difference in the outcome. I live with this personal horror, this personal hell, encroaching on every waking moment and in every dream. It's the new normal. I lay in bed. The scene replays over and over in my mind's eye. The living nightmare is unavoidable. I lay there with my eyes closed and I am back in the Sunday morning, in my rainbow tie-dyed Crocs, 9-1-1 on speaker phone beside me, counting out to five over and over again, making my dead father's heartbeat/heart beat.

The song plays in an endless loop in my head.

Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive, stayin' alive
*Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive*⁹

Simply the Best: September 1979

The best memory of my father is from September 1979.

You're simply the best, better than all the rest
Better than anyone, anyone I ever met
I'm stuck on your heart, I hang on every word you say
*Tear us apart, baby, I would rather be dead*¹⁰

I was in the first full month of my third-grade year. It was a good year. I had clipped news release publicity photos of Loni Anderson from the paper and pinned them up beside my old school desk with a green Skoal Bandit bumper sticker across the front. Loni hung there with Buck Rogers, Battlestar Galactica, and the ripped cover of a folder that had the Atari Centipede cover art on it. Third grade was shaping up to be a good year for this eight-year-old man about town and conscientious consumer of pop culture.

⁸ Bee Gees, "Stayin' Alive."

⁹ Bee Gees, "Stayin' Alive."

¹⁰ Tina Turner, vocalist, "The Best" by Mark Chapman and Holly Knight, recorded 1989, track 2 on *Foreign Affair*, Columbia Records, CD.

As with many of the school activities, flyers went home for the plethora of afterschool activities in which a young man such as I must take part to experience the 1977-78 school year to the fullest. Football was an offering that was too brutal for my tastes. Basketball was a given as I had taken part the year before. But something new was on the horizon that I simply could not pass up: Cub Scouts. Cub Scouts was a vast knowable unknown, full of possibilities. Cub Scouts was the secret society of the elementary school set, full of ritual, signs, pledges, secret handshakes, and the fellowship of other pre-pubescent menfolk. Cub Scouts was the Masonic Lodge of the third-grade set.

To understand why school and extracurricular activities were high on my bucket list, you first need to understand how I lived. My family went together only to church and school. Work for the dad, school for the kids, grocery store for mom, and that was it. We did travel with our mother to stay with her family during summer and Christmas. Sometimes, we traveled to see the other side of her family in North Carolina, the ones who had turned what used to be the old family homestead at the top of the mountain into a family campground and make-shift RV park. No matter where I went, save church and school, I was not around children my age. My brother was two years younger and we lived across the field from his best friend. My sister was five years younger than I and not someone I could consider a playmate. I had a three-network television as my window to the outside world. I craved friendship and comradery.

In honesty, I also looked for freedom because my life in his house was eternally miserable. In my eight-year-old mind, my father was a tyrannical despot. In retrospect, he worked ridiculously hard to provide a home with the necessities of life, he decried anything other than yard/garden work as frivolous. I had two older cousins from whom I inherited many of my clothes, save underwear. We were at the self-described non-denominational denomination

Christian church three to four times a week where we were to be "seen and not heard." Defiance of my father's will always elicited a spanking by hand, which graduated to at least a switching, if not a belt across your butt. I lived in fear of my father, all the while wanting his approval.

What a way to backstory my happiest memory of my father. Let us return to the notice I carried home from school that September in 1979.

The regional scouts called a meeting of all interested parties to meet on the appointed hour in the great gathering place of elementary schools, the cafeteria. When the day arrived, my father seemed uncharacteristically happy to go with me to the grand proceedings. After we shuffled onto the vinyl bench seat in the front of the doo-doo brown Pontiac, my father talked about Boy Scouts and Eagle Scouts and all the amazing things I could learn. In full late seventies vehicle safety glory, I sat seatbelt-less, rapt by his tales, his enthusiasm, and my imagination.

Hordes of eager young gentleman, so refined in their dirty t-shirts and dust-streaked sneakers, packed the cafeteria. My father eagerly awaited to get me out of my book and television lifestyle and into camping, knots, and the other manly arts. I anticipated another step into the larger world of my imagining. We pledged the flag and then took our first Scout oath.

The scout leader called all the young men in the cafeteria to the front of the cafeteria. We rushed forward, jockeying for position next to our best comrades as we marshalled into formation for inspection on this greasy, industrial parade ground. The Scout Leader, like a grand general, walked to parade line and marked the first ten soldier boys.

"Who will lead this troop?" Scout Leader Leonidas issued his clarion call. "We need two parents." A parent here raised a hand, then a parent there raised a hand. The first ten new Cub Scouts mustered together at the other end of the cafeteria to turn in the relevant paperwork and meet their new Den Leaders.

“Who will lead this troop?” came the clarion call. Two more parents volunteered. “Who will lead this troop?” The scout leader issued his challenge again. Again, two parents answered the call.

Then the turn was to my squad of fresh-faced want-to-be Scouts. “Who will lead this troop?” No one raised their hand. Silence fell. The hallowed halls of learning echoed as the Scoutmaster asked again, “Who will lead this troop?” No one raised a hand.

I can’t recall the sales pitch or guilt trip that the scout leader launched into. My ears were ringing as the blood rushed into my head. I promised myself that I would not cry, but my face was white hot. The disappointment and shame of not having a caring Den Leader to usher into this step towards adulthood crushed me with the weight of a proverbial ton of bricks. I couldn’t breathe.

“Who will lead this troop?” Then a hand went up. The hand was that of my friend Jason’s dad, broad-faced and smiling.

Then IT happened. The second hand went up. My father had volunteered to be one of my Den Leaders. He had saved us all from the disappointment and shame I was feeling. My young heart soared. I was elated to the point that I was lightheaded and on the verge of passing out.

*Give me a lifetime of promises and a world of dreams
Speak the language of love like you know what it means
Mm, and it can't be wrong, take my heart and make it strong, . . .¹¹*

I would not feel this way again until my freshman year of high school when we were in gym class. All other gym classes ran a boys’ gym on one side of gym and a girls’ class on the other. My boys’ class met at the time when the girls’ gym teacher had the cheerleaders meet for practice. The only interaction they had with us was when the cheer squad joined our class for

¹¹ Turner, “The Best.”

mixed doubles badminton. I had a schoolboy crush on the senior captain cheerleader with whom I had American Civics class. She got to choose her partner first. She chose me. I felt the same wave of elation and looming unconsciousness.

Third grade year was the simply the best year with my dad. I still have my pine box derby car that sits on my shelf as an irreplaceable and priceless heirloom.

*You're the best
Better than all the rest
Better than anyone, anyone I ever met
Oh, you're the best¹²*

*A Sunday in March 2020 – Part 2: 10 Minutes Earlier (Walking in **My** Shoes)*

*Well, you can tell by the way I use my walk
I'm a woman's man, no time to talk
Music loud and women warm, I've been kicked around
Since I was born¹³*

“Thomas! Get over here!” Your mother’s strangled panic was not new. You got this phone call at least four if not more times before. You know the proverbial shit has hit the fan again. The call means, usually, a fall resulting from heat exhaustion, falling off a lawn mower, using the walker instead of the wheelchair. The list goes on. The call usually, but not always, meant a trip to the hospital, most recently the August before, when he stumbled in the driveway, breaking not only his hip but the last hope he had of not being permanently dependent on a motorized wheelchair. You always fear the worst in trotting at a full canter across the yard, holding your shorts up because that’s what you slept in and they have little elastic left, and even though you have the legs of a man half your age, the spare tire you carry around your middle is a tractor tire, not a whitewall. You shuffle because your new tie-dye printed Crocs you considered

¹² Turner, “The Best.”

¹³ Bee Gees, “Stayin’ Alive.”

as house shoes are barely clinging to your heels, and you know any minute you are going to fall and break something. You're not sure what, but something.

*Well, you can tell by the way I use my walk
I'm a woman's man, no time to talk¹⁴*

The Interview (Part One)

The interview was a jumping off point for my research, as noted in Chapter 4. After I concluded the interview in April of 2019, my father agreed to as many follow up interviews as I wanted. Because he was traditionally tight-lipped about his past, my hope was that my curiosity and his being the center of attention for the interview would encourage my father to share the stories he had thus far withheld from me. I was disappointed in the first interview and was looking for deeper, more personal details that would help me to rewrite the narrative of my father into a more sympathetic figure. Before I found the time to sit down with him again, he died suddenly, leaving me with unanswered questions I never asked, in stories that I will never know. I crave details of the life he lived that formed him into the man he was.

I also found myself on an ethically shaky ground, as my father is no longer living to defend himself, or tell his side of my stories. Laetus Lategan offers a number of guidelines for ethical research, of which paradigmatic choices, dictum of do no harm, creation of knowledge, integrity of data, use of data, risk, privacy, and conflict of interest have direct bearing on my decision and subsequent behavior in regard to the interview with my father.¹⁵ I am writing of my father postmortem with my family's consent. Several of Lategan's rules support an ethical choice to use the data if the researcher considers a greater good may come of the data's use. But, several of Lategan's rules focus on the protection of participants in research. As my father's

¹⁴ Bee Gees, "Stayin' Alive."

¹⁵ "The Building of a Responsible Research Community: The Role of Ethics," *Journal of Research Administration* 43, no. 1, (2012) 92-95.

living representative, I consulted my mother who, after knowing the issues I was discussing, gave permission to go ahead for the single reason of the creation of knowledge. In this case, telling the truth.

In the years since his terminal diagnosis, we had gradually found common ground on which to begin to respect each other. We built a better relationship with a space where we could communicate, but I still felt, looming over us, the years of verbal and physical abuse and unrequited familial love from/for both of us. I found it hard to let go of the years of resentment I harbored as a result of his need to be needed and in control, and in reaction to his own complicated body image issues that kindled destructive personal flames in me, with which I still struggle to extinguish in my adult life. He seemed to have a tough time accepting that I lived my life from a separate set of rules than those which guided his life. We had muddled through with many growing pains.

Me: In the house you grew up in, did they ever install plumbing while you were living there?

Dad: No. There was never any plumbing in that house until I tried to move up here, into the house that I built. And then, one of my brothers remodeled the house and put water into the house, and it had a bathroom, then, and running water.¹⁶

David Silverman says, “qualitative research moves in unpredicted directions.”¹⁷ In this interview situation, my father functioned as a human magnet, constantly pulling the compass to wherever he chose to be North.

Dad: My youngest sister was born in 1947. We got electricity in 1948.¹⁸

¹⁶ Billy T. Townsend, interview by author, Elizabethton, TN (April 7, 2019).

¹⁷ *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook, Third Edition* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010), 175.

¹⁸ B. Townsend, interview.

Dad: And I can remember when my mom and sisters used an iron, an old-fashioned iron that you sit on the wood stove and heat, and they ironed with it. That's what they used to iron clothes with. We didn't have any utility water. We had a cistern, and the WPA [Works Progress Administration] came through and put a pump in. We got water off the top of the house and ran it, the cistern. We carried buckets of water in the house and used them there.¹⁹

This old house is the one he moved his parents out of and into his self-built home where, for the first time, his mother and father lived in a house with indoor plumbing and a private telephone line.

Dad: It made things so much easier for her. She just liked doing her canning. We would raise the garden; she canned all summer over the wood stove in the hot kitchen. And then, when we moved into the house that I built, she had running water. She was able to cook on the electric stove and it was a lot cooler for her.²⁰

I never considered my father's determination to control his own narrative nor my willingness to defer to him as my father. My father co-opted the interview.

As I entered the living room, Dad directed me to where he wanted me to set up and where he wanted to sit. My father moved from his casual seating in an electric recliner to a more formal seat on his sofa where he receives guests. The sofa supplied a more "put together" setting to capture for video. During set-up of the recording equipment, Dad expressed concern about being videotaped due to his appearance. He was well into a lengthy battle with a disease called Cerebellar Ataxia. Basically, his cerebellum was dying and one day his autonomic body functions would simply quit like being unplugged from an outlet.

When I set up my laptop, tablet, phone, and microphone, my father got visibly nervous, which should have been my first signal to stop and rethink my technological octopus I was assembling. From a researcher's standpoint, this might have been a rookie mistake, but in

¹⁹ B. Townsend, interview.

²⁰ B. Townsend, interview.

retrospect, I'm glad that I missed these cues and continued to set up the equipment. Now that he is gone, I have a him on video telling me his life story from his point of view, for which I am eternally grateful.

I asked Dad what was wrong. He was worried about how he looked. Dad had already put on a nice shirt and sat on the "good" couch. I thought for a second and remembered that my father was vain. He was a handsome man. Until the later years of his disease, he always looked younger than his peers by ten years. The family had to practically get a congressional act to get him to stop going to the barber for what little hair he had left and let my mother take the trimmers to his head.

I stopped my set up to both reassure him and to discuss his concerns. I told him that he always took a good picture. My mother piped in and seconded the motion. I wasn't lying. He still looked better than his condition should have. He looked healthy and handsome. It was one of the factors that made his death so shocking is that for a man that could only leave his house in a wheelchair, he did not look the part.

Reassured, my father smiled. My father had the best smile. I will always be jealous of, jealous for, and glad of, his smile.

I resumed set-up. After about fifteen minutes of technical difficulty, I had all the equipment working properly.

Me: Okay. Okay. I just have to sit still or it's going to be moving around. Do you want me to get your water before we start? All right.²¹

I asked Dad to remember his family's life prior to and just after receiving public utility services and encouraged him to share anecdotes and stories. Dad asked to forgo the questions in

²¹ B. Townsend, interview.

lieu of a narrative he prepared in advance of the interview. I consented without offering an alternative.

Me: Okay. So, did you ever live in a house, or a time and place where you didn't have either running water, electricity, telephone, or any combination?

Dad: I did, but I would rather start at the beginning.

Me: Okay, go ahead.

Dad: I was born on a cold Thursday morning, on February 18, 1943.²²

My father continued without prompt for twenty minutes, recounting his life story. He touched on a few selected topics from the questions but stuck strictly to a series of events that he had clearly in his mind. I nodded and kept eye contact as much as possible. I talked with him for a total of twenty-seven minutes and twenty seconds.²³

Me: Okay. Is there anything else, anything you want to share?

Dad: Well, just like if you had to get up in the middle of the night and go urinate, you had to go outside and it was cold so you'd put it off as long as you could but eventually you had to get up and go do it.

Me: All right. Well, thank you.

Dad: Okay.²⁴

My father was pleasant recounting his rehearsed story to me. Before I asked a single question, he had a complete story of the timeline of his life ready to share. Like a theme park performer playing the role of a beloved character, no matter what I, the visiting tourist, asked, he would not go off-script.

²² B. Townsend, interview.

²³ B. Townsend, interview.

²⁴ B. Townsend, interview.

Interlude: The Autobiographical Obituary

What follows is the obituary my father left for us to publish upon his death. The obituary had been written down in some form for over thirty years. My father was convinced he would die young. I have included his specific instructions. I have used ellipses to redact some names and left his spelling as written. I include the obituary as the wording is almost identical to my father's life story that he shared in the interview. I also wanted to include in honor of his wishes to have it published.

Blanks are to be filled in according to the date listed in (parenthesis) then remove the information in parenthesis).

Updated 2/9/2020 [just over a month before his death]. List the following obituary in the Johnson City Press, Elizabethton Star after the private service has been completed.

Mr. Billy T. Townsend, age ____, (DOB 2-18-43) of the Powder Branch Area of Carter County, TN passed from this earthly life to receive his eternal reward on _____, following several years of declining health.

On a cold Thursday morning, February 18, 1943, Mr. Townsend was the eighth of nine children born to the late Ernest Robert and Irene Campbell Townsend. His father passed away in March 1968 at the age of 66 and his mother passed away in December 1976 at the age of 72. Mr. Townsend was a native of Carter County, TN where he was born and lived all of his life except for 2 and ½ years when he lived in Washington, D. C., working for the Federal Government, 1960 – 1962, and for the time he served in the military. He received his Army basic training at Ft. Jackson, S. C. and his Advance Individual Training at Ft. Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas. He was a member of the U. S. Army Reserves, 820th Station Hospital located in Johnson City, TN. for six years and advanced to the rank of Staff Sergeant.

Mr. Townsend retired as the Assistant Chief of Medical Administration Service after 35 ½ years of service from the Veterans Administration Medical Center, Mountain Home, TN in September 1995 (now known as the James H. Quillen Veterans Affairs Medical Center). After retiring from the VA Medical Center, he worked for The James H. Quillen College of Medicine, Family Medicine Department, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN and retired from there after 11 years of service.

Mr. Townsend was a member of Walnut Christian Church, Johnson City, TN where he had attended for the past _____ years (started in August 2001). Mr. Townsend also had many good friends at Shady Grove Baptist Church, Rogersville, TN where he attended church when visiting with his brother-in-law and sister-in-law, Gene and Joyce

Vance. He was previously a very active member of Oak Grove Christian Church, Elizabethton, TN for almost 50 years where he was baptized into Christ at the age of nine. Mr. Townsend served in several leadership capacities while attending Oak Grove. Sunday School and Vacation Bible School teacher, Worship Leader, Sunday School Superintendent, Director of Vacation Bible School, Deacon, Elder, Trustee, Chairman of the Finance Committee, Chairman of the Board of Elders and Deacons. And for the last 20 years at Oak Grove, Mr. Townsend served as Treasurer and Secretary and prepared the church bulletin each Sunday during those 20 years. He was also a member of the Carter County Christian Men's Fellowship for several years and served as treasurer for the fellowship for four years.

Mr. Townsend was the youngest member of the 1960 graduating class of Happy Valley High School, Elizabethton, TN and served as alumni class treasurer from July 2000 until his death. He attended Milligan College, Milligan College, TN and received his Bachelors Degree from East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN.

Mr. Townsend grew up living and working on a farm with his parents, brothers and sisters where he was taught the value of good work etheics and hard work. As an adult he was always proud of his vegetable garden and enjoyed the spring time when new life began especially when planting and working in his garden and yard. Although Mr. Townsend spent almost 47 years doing administrative work in an office environment, he enjoyed building and doing carpentry work, especially building his own house, and assisting friends and neighbors with construction projects. He was always willing to lend a helping hand to others in need. He also enjoyed working on his computer and surfing the internet. In his retirement years, he became an avid reader and enjoyed reading a variety of books and watching college and professional football on TV.

Mr. Townsend was a 50+ year member of Watauga Masonic Lodge #622 F&AM, Watauga, TN where he served as Master of the Lodge during the year of 1976; he was a 50+ year member of the Johnson City York Rite Bodies. Thomas E. Matson Chapter #131, Holston Council #101, and Watauga Commander #25, Johnson City, TN. He was also a member of the Charles Newton Bush Past Masters Association, Johnson City, TN.

. . . [omitted: detailed list of all parents, siblings, in-laws, nieces and nephews] . . .

Survivors include his loving and devoted wife. . . of 50 years (married 3-5-70), two sons, Thomas Townsend and his wife . . . Elizabethton, TN; . . . and his wife . . . Johnson City, TN; one daughter . . . Elizabethton, TN. He was also survived by two grandsons . . . one granddaughter . . . Elizabethton, TN; and one step granddaughter . . . Johnson City, TN.

Also surviving are four sisters; . . . all of Johnson City, TN and . . . of Maryville, TN. A brother-in-law . . . Gray, TN. Several nephews, nieces, and cousins survive. Also, a very special neighbor and friend . . ., who was always willing to assist or complete projects for Mr. Townsend as his health began to decline. A special niece . . . who checked frequently to see if she could assist Mr. Townsend or his wife in any way and often prepared food

for them. He leaves behind his church family at Walnut Christian Church. Some special friends and co-workers with whom he worked at the Veterans Administration Medical Center and at the ETSU Collage of Medicine.

It was Mr. Townsend's request that **no formal viewing be conducted** [original emphasis]. Mr. Townsend requested no flowers and that anyone desiring to make a memorial gift in his memory do so by contributing to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Memphis, TN; Walnut Christian Church, 2318 South Greenwood Drive, Johnson City, TN 37604, or to the charity of their choice.

A private service for the immediately family was conducted at the Mosleum of Happy Valley Memorial Park, Elizabethton, TN. _____ (date) with burial in the Garden of the Last Supper.

Hathaway-Percy Funeral Home and cremation service, Elizabethton, TN provided services for the family.

I would prefer that this not occur. (**only if the family wants this**) A memorial service will be conducted at a later date by _____, Minister, Walnut Christian Church, Johnson City, TN and former Pastor, Shady Grove Baptist Church, Rogersville, TN., (if available)]

Pallbearers; [redacted list of nephews and family friend]. (Use a honorary pallbearer if any of those listed above cannot serve).

My mother opted to use a more standard obituary template provided by the funeral home, which covered his life in broader strokes that could be contained in a single print column in the newspaper and cost significantly less.²⁵ His obituary would have required us to take out a full page advertisement in the paper. His request for no formal memorial service was granted not by family but by the timing of his death, a week after Carter County issued a shelter-at-home order due to the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶

I found the obituary interesting in some of the points that my father intentionally made. The first was the inclusion of a "step-granddaughter." My mother in the published obituary dropped that language and simply made my niece a "granddaughter." My father had a solitary

²⁵Hathawaypercy.com, "Billy Thomas Townsend" last updated March 30, 2020; Johnson City Press, "Obituary Mr. Billy Thomas Townsend" (March 30, 2020).

²⁶ Cartercountyttn.gov, "COVID-19 Resources" last accessed June 2, 2020.

view that “blood is blood.” You don’t betray “blood.” You deal with “blood” problems within the family. No matter how close a friend to the family, friends are not “blood.” Stepchildren or adopted children are not “blood.” Up until the end, my father would only discuss his wishes or problems with “blood” relatives, which included his sisters but not their spouses, any of his wife’s family, or his sons’ spouses. This trait is why my father never went more than once or twice to a counselor or psychologist: you keep problems in the family only; you don’t air dirty laundry with anyone.

This refusal to seek help has been common to men who think “keeping to oneself” is preferable to sharing secrets. Sigmund Freud suggested that men have a resistance to seeking therapy because it represents a loss of power or status to the male ego.²⁷ My father seems to equate asking for help or revealing his inner thoughts to losing his power or status. Ryan McKelley wrote that “a man subscribing to the masculine protest might refuse to seek help to avoid being perceived as weak or feminine.” My father, in a larger terms, dealt with issues of personal power and sexuality his whole life.²⁸ McKelley continues “when men combine the pressures of the masculine protest with underdeveloped social interest, they strive for superiority rather than perfection.”²⁹ My father was a perfectionist with limited social interaction. Cory Chen and Joanna Dognin propose “when hegemonic masculine ideals guide relational patterns, a significant clash of cultures can occur across family, social, and patient care relationships.”³⁰

²⁷ “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” in *Freud: Therapy and Technique*, edited by Philip Rieff (New York: Collier, 1937), 235.

²⁸ Townsend, 101.

²⁹ “Men’s Resistance to Seeking Help: Using Individual Psychology to Understand Counseling-Reluctant Men,” *Journal of Individual Psychology* 63, no. 1 (2007),51. EBSCO.

³⁰ “Addressing the Influence of Hegemonic Masculinity on Veterans Through Brief Dynamic Interpersonal Therapy,” *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 18 no. 3 (2017), 239.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/men0000118>.

Given my relationship with my father combined with what little he shared of my grandfather, striving for superiority and prescribed fictions are strong outlines of those relationships.

Don't fall from grace with open skies
Leading the blind with open eyes
No compromise
Blood's thicker than water
*Blood's thicker than water*³¹

My father and I got into some intense arguments about issues of kinship. My best friend from college is an “uncle” to my children; they call him uncle. There were some years that they saw him more than they saw their “blood” uncle. My father hated this. He loved my friend, but he was a friend, not “blood.” When my spouse and I took classes to be foster parents and told him and my mother that we were considering adopting a child, my father was repulsed. His actual comments included something like “you don’t know what kind of problems you’ll get because they’re already broken by someone else.” I knew his beliefs of how parents treat children/how children could be broken were already set. We didn’t discuss it again.

The Interview (Part 2)

My father preferred to relate his story in linear fashion. He had stories of birth, a bit of culture, and a few details of his life growing up. His narrative was rehearsed and practiced, in lock step with his autobiographical obituary.

Dad: I was born on a cold Thursday morning, on February the 18th, 1943. A midwife came to the house, and I was the eighth out of nine children, all born in the same house. One of my sisters had already been married and had a child seven months older than me. The next sister was 15 years old, and she helped the midwife deliver me and clean me up. From that time on, I just grew. I couldn't remember whether we did not have the utility water. We had no electricity. We had a five-room house. One room was big enough for the kitchen, it had a wood cook stove, and a hutch cabinet, and a wood box. That's how big that room was.³²

³¹ Bobby Bazinet and Jake Gosling, *Blood's Thicker than Water* (New York: Warner Chappell Music, 2016).

³² B. Townsend, interview.

I found Dad's account of his birth dramatic, which is a word that I have not often associated with him. He found comfort in reading Amish romance novels and watching television programs such as "The Waltons" that romanticized rural Appalachian life.

Post interview, my father moved from his chosen location to his armchair where he usually sits in the room. Once there, recording devices powered down, he began to recount stories, talked off the cuff and off the record. He talked for an additional forty-five minutes while I put up the recording equipment to rush home to begin transcription of the interview. What I failed to do was noting all those accounts of the things I wanted him to share with me and with those who would read my work.

I found myself using the word "lost" to describe these stories I did not note or did not glean from future interviews with my father. In my mind, these stories are lost because I felt like I had them in my father. In the wake of my father's death, not having his life stories add to the list of things my family no longer has in him. The loss is palpable. I have a sense of loss in something I never had.

Lacking notes, my father's stories are largely forgotten. The day I interviewed him, I asked if we could do another interview to keep discussing these stories from his childhood. He agreed. I never followed through. What I've did nor record were stories of people building cisterns on hills above houses so they could use gravity to have running water in their house. I lost stories of my father toting water uphill from the creek to the one room schoolhouse. I lost stories of how my father worked wherever he could to earn a penny including putting up hay, planting tobacco, and housekeeping at the church he attended.

I discovered through Dad's narrative that certain bits and pieces of the culture and history of his corner of rural Appalachia poked through. Although he shared no stories to illustrate most

of his details, he did have details about living with oil lamps, cook stoves, wash pan baths, gasoline powered washing machines, outhouses, smokehouses. These were in line with the flavor I was looking for. I remain disappointed that his narrative held few of his own thoughts and feelings *about* his life experiences.

Dad: From that time on, I just grew. I couldn't remember whether we did not have the utility water. We had no electricity. We had a five-room house. One room was big enough for the kitchen, it had a wood cook stove, and a hutch cabinet, and a wood box. That's how big that room was.³³

What could be problematic, in a way, is that this was not the interview I expected. I was hoping to find remembrances and stories that would come flooding back to him as we talked. The memories I was hoping he would access would be innocuous. In hindsight, I should have understood that my father's memories were tied into knots, just like my memories and my narratives. He held on tight, possibly, to keep from the painful memoires rolling freely about.

I talked extensively with my mother through this writing process. She gave me her blessing to tread into this territory. My father shared little about his childhood with his own children beyond a rote refrain which can be summarized as, "We didn't have a lot of money, we worked hard, and we ate beans." My grandfather worked shift work at the local rayon plant, my grandmother stayed home, the whole family grew corn and tobacco.

I never met my grandfather and the following is the little I have been able to piece together about him. He died before my parents were married. My father rarely spoke about my grandfather. The vignettes he did share about his father painted a picture of a man whose mother died young and who lived with my great-grandfather, who was cruel. The picture was decidedly

³³ B. Townsend, interview.

contrary to the regional rural stereotype of “family values.”³⁴ My father once said to me that “he [my great-grandfather and county sheriff] was a hard man and he beat your granddaddy all the time.” As an adult, my grandfather worked hard as an itinerant farmer on my grandmother’s family land that she inherited, raising his family of nine children in a house with four total rooms including the kitchen. He worked in local plants and quarries. He chopped off cats’ tails with his hoe when he caught them in the garden. When my unmarried aunt told my grandfather she was pregnant, he beat her, then grabbed a hatchet with the intention of going outside to the car in his driveway, where the man who had impregnated my aunt waited, and chop off that man’s head, He didn’t. My grandfather would regularly slap/hit my father as a child as he walked through the house. Despite the abuse he endured, my father brought my grandparents to live with him in the house he built. My father nursed my grandfather died as he slowly of colon cancer.³⁵

“I showed him,” was my father’s only commentary I ever heard from my father on my grandfather’s his father’s illness and death. My father had no tenderness in his voice as he told me this as I was driving him home for the store. I was shocked and did not know what to say. We sat together in his confession for the remainder of the drive home. I wish I had asked him what he showed his father: showed him that no matter how mean my grandfather had been, my father would do the right thing by honoring his parents and nursing his dying father; that he was a more moral person than what my grandfather was; that he was a more successful man in that he built a house with modern amenities; that their relationship was an unstated power play that my father won by providing a place for my grandfather die in peace. What did he show him?

³⁴ Peggy J. Cantrell, “Family Violence in Appalachia,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies Association* 6 (1994) 39-47. Cantrell delves into the myths and stereotypes of Appalachia to find that cases of family violence in Appalachia area significantly high even though the region has a reputation of being family centric.

³⁵ “Ernest R. Townsend, Sr., Elizabethton, Obituary” *Johnson City Press Chronicle* (March 17, 1968), 2.

My father also spoke little of his brothers, who were nearly two decades older than him and with whom he shared a bed for years in the tiny family home. Both his brothers had drinking problems. He slept between them. They urinated in the bed and would not allow him to get up. One uncle pulled my father back to bed when he tried to go to the outhouse. After his brothers' relatively early deaths, my father took care of his nieces and nephews with love. They were blood and blood takes care of blood.

Dad: Like everybody, yes, we were all poor. It didn't seem too bad not to have running water because nobody else in the community had running water except maybe a couple people who had built sheds or barns up on the hill and ran the water right into their house.³⁶

If I speculate, stigma was a driving force in my father's life. According to Erving Goffman, stigma is a psychological and social construct that includes negative stereotypes, negative self-image, and/or a feeling of shame.³⁷ The experience of stigma is prescriptive; individuals experience stigma differently. Although the experience of stigma is personal and can often be described using extreme language, stigma is an experience reified by the dominant power group.³⁸ Stigma includes a sense of shame and being shamed by someone for not being "normal."

Dad: At the time, using the outhouse, didn't think anything about it because that was the common thing to do. And then, it was so much more convenient to have the bathroom. You didn't have to go outside and smell all that stuff.

Me: Thinking back to when you were a kid and not having running water, is there anything you actually miss from that time?

Dad: I don't miss anything, I'm just glad that we got the running water because you had a bath, you'd get a wash pan, and fill it up with water, and take your bath that way. Once in a while, we had a wash tub where we would heat water and get in the

³⁶ B. Townsend, interview; My father used the word "poor" to describe the whole community, never his own family. My father, his family, and I live in the Oak Grove community of Carter County, Tennessee;.

³⁷ *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 1-11.

³⁸ Mark L Hatzenbuehler, Jo C. Phelan, and Bruce G. Link, "Stigma as a Fundamental Cause of Population Health Inequalities," *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 5 (May 2013): 813--814.

bathub, get in that to take a bath. One of my sisters had a big, long tub that she would let us use once in a while, but not very often because they didn't have running water either so that's what she liked to use.³⁹

Stigma perhaps comes to bear from my father's life of poverty and abuse and his efforts to make sure people saw him as more than the circumstances of his childhood. John O'Brien theorizes that stigmatized groups exhibit a publicly acceptable behavior and a private publicly unacceptable behavior when with peers and mentors experiencing the same stigma stereotyping; un/acceptable is from the point of view of the dominant social group.⁴⁰ According to Larry Griffin, "discourse about the southern mountains centers squarely on class: narratives of exploitation, oppression, and redemptive collective action by victimized highlanders abound, understandably structuring discussion and inquiry into the histories of Appalachia."⁴¹ My father grew up on the lowest socioeconomic scale of his community and seemed to look back on his experiences from a more privileged socioeconomic lens of his later life, thus becoming the source of his own stigmatization. Rebecca Scott wrote "The stigmatization of Appalachian whiteness occurs through the stereotype of the ignorant hillbilly, which is similar in many ways to 'white trash'."

I think in many ways, because of he saw his family as "white trash hillbillies" and projected those feelings on the community at large. His definition of "white trash," though, is different from that of contemporary scholarship. Matt Wray wrote,

White trash [original emphasis] is a curious phrase. At first, its meanings and reasons for being seem easy enough to understand: it's an insult, or the punch line to a joke, or maybe just a way to name those people down the road with the washing machine and the broken-down truck in the front yard. It conjures images of poor, ignorant, racist whites:

³⁹ B. Townsend, interview.

⁴⁰ "Spoiled Group Identities and Backstage Work: A Theory of Stigma Management Rehearsals" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2011): 291-309. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41303984>. 306-309

⁴¹ "Whiteness and Southern Identity in the Mountain and Lowland South," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 10, no. 1/2 (2004), 7.

trailer parks and wife beaters, too many kids and not enough government cheese. It's hard to care about such people. It's even harder to take them seriously. Maybe that's why, for so many, *white trash* [original emphasis] rolls off the tongue with such condescending ease.⁴²

My father, if I speculate, internally may have placed himself into this stigmatized group and felt included in it when others talked about “hillbillies” or “white trash.”

When I use the term “white trash” I emphasize the “trash” and deemphasize the “white” in relation to my father’s understanding of the term. My father had little, if any, interaction with people of color in his formative years. From looking at his high school yearbooks, he did not attend school with any Black people. Based on the two instances when he did talk of race, I believe perhaps he was a tacit racist.

My father never disparaged anyone for the color of their skin. However, he commented once that a custodian at his work was a “good” Black man because he stepped to the rear when white men get onto the elevator or the custodian disembarked the elevator when white women got on. My father hated the television show *The Jeffersons*. My siblings and I would be watching reruns during the evening when my father came in from yard work; my father would complain about “those” loud people and we should not watch “their” show. Anyone not white for him was an Other whom he could not understand. In using his life as a template, there was no Black presence, so his world was white and therefore only the trash applied. His probable identification with the term “white trash” more than likely had no racial connotation to him, as his world was white.

A key pillar from social identity theory states that individuals improve their self-esteem through their identification with social groups With which they are affiliated.⁴³ By identifying

⁴² *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

⁴³ Griffin, 14.

himself through his employment identity (hospital administrator) or in his volunteer efforts (church elder and church treasurer), my father obtained a mantle of respectability that he may not have felt being from, as my aunt told me, a member of the poorest family in the community. By wearing a suit and tie to church, he was not the little boy who owned a single pair of bib overalls for each year. My father hated the television show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, that showed a comical look at “dumb hillbillies” and he loved *The Waltons* and *Little House on the Prairie*, both of which showed poverty can be overcome, or at least overlooked if those in poverty are morally upright and “God fearing” people. Poverty of the Godly becomes almost praiseworthy.

August 2017: Don't Take Your Guns to Town

*He laughed and kissed his mom
And said your Billy Joe's a man
I can shoot as quick and straight as anybody can
But I wouldn't shoot without a cause
I'd gun nobody down
But she cried again as he rode away
Don't take your guns to town son
Leave your guns at home Bill
Don't take your guns to town⁴⁴*

The last Friday in August of 2017: I stood behind the house at the bottom of the long, concrete driveway with my father. He sat on his rollator: a blue, beat-up, scratched and dented walker that rolled with a fold down seat. The two of us stood/sat in silence for a time.

“Are you going to give me the gun?” I asked as calmly as I could for the fifth or sixth time.

“No.” He said tersely.

⁴⁴ Johnny Cash, vocalist, “Don't Take Your Guns to Town” by Johnny B. Cash, recorded August 1958, track 2 on side 2 on *The Fabulous Johnny Cash*, Columbia Records, 33 1/3 rpm.

“Please?” I pleaded softly.

“No.” He repeated.

I knew I was already risking my life being where I was. I knew I could take my father in a fight. His condition left him with no balance, though he was strong. He was also seventy-five. We had not been down that road since I was a teenager. I could not stop thinking about my children if the gun went off in our struggle and I got shot or their grandfather got shot, which both defeated the stupid idea of my being there as I was. I pulled my phone out of my right pocket, the pocket opposite him, and looked at the open text messenger. “Do it,” I typed and hit send, knowing I had forever changed my relationship with my father. I had just sent the instructions to my sister to call the police to come help, knowing that I was stepping into uncharted and precarious territory.

I stood there beside him, hand on his shoulder and we looked off into the distance at the Frasier fir thicket that had been ten years of live Christmas trees grown to full height. We looked beyond the copse of trees and at the hillside that was once a hayfield that he worked with his father. We looked at everything and nothing, barely breathing.

I got a call, like so many calls before, from across the yard. My sister called me.

“Hello.”

“Thomas, Dad is having one of his moods. Mom is locked in her room. He was yelling at me. He has his gun and said he was going to shoot himself.” My sister was frantic, and angry, and needed help.

“I’m coming.” I threw my shoes on and shouted out to Kallie to keep the kids in the house. She knew something was not right by the look on my face. I jogged down the steps and across what little yard was mine and into my parents’ yard.

I was halfway in front of the house where I grew up when I heard a gunshot from behind the house. I ducked mid step. My blood froze instantly. Three ideas hit me simultaneously in that instant. First, the phrase “my blood froze” describes exactly the wave of terror that can sweep over you; in that instant, the phrase is not hyperbole. Second, the world looked completely different: the colors of the sunset became hyper saturated; the house with red shutters turned gray; my vision seemed to register the ultra-violet spectrum. Third, where was the shot coming from: had my father just shot me, shot at me, shot himself, where was he shooting? The crack of the shot let me know that the bullet had either done its work or not. I was still standing, which meant the bullet was not intended for me. He had shot himself or not. He was lying dead in the back driveway or not. There was nothing I could do but go and look.

In my head, I saw him lying on the gore-covered pavement. I knew I did not want my mother or my sister to see him like that. I made my legs move again. Step by step, my stomach was rolling. Nausea swept over me; my head spun; my eyes rolled from side to side. I could tell I was breathing heavily, almost panting. I don't deal well with death in general and this was a situation I had never faced.

At first, I could not see him when I rounded the corner of the house. I expected him to be sitting or lying in the driveway. As I warily inched my way down the driveway, I saw him sitting behind the storage building on his walker, looking off into the distance. In some ways, I was relieved he was sitting and breathing. In some ways, I was more scared than ever if he was out here shooting his gun while he was hysterical.

I can't remember now if I called or texted my sister. Either way, we decided I would talk to him. If he would not give up the gun and/or seemed determined to hurt himself, we would

have to call the police. She said she would wait for me to decide what we would do. My sister sent my mother to my house.

My father and I had a conversation. The only things I remember is that we were calm, and I asked after a while for him to hand me his gun. He said he had fired the gun into the air. The rest is the image of me standing next to him, hand on his shoulder, listening for the sirens echoing off the hills. The gun sat on his lap. He wasn't holding it, but I wasn't sure his reflexes weren't quick enough to beat me to the draw.

As I stood there reassuring him that I would not leave every time my father told me I didn't need to stay with him, my mind tried to race but my mental legs seemed held fast in a quagmire. Random thoughts erupted and sang back into my mental abyss. The work I had been doing on my courses as this was the first week of fall semester seemed insignificant. I thought about my father's frustration at his debilitating condition and how the superhumanly strong man, who enjoyed twelve or so hours of back breaking work, was hunched on his walker. I thought about how he would most likely not speak to me again. I thought about how he had supported my family financially after my job loss and how that safety net that he had trained me to enjoy over my whole life was now gone. I thought about him trying to kill himself if I left. I thought about what I would tell my children if he did. What would I tell myself?

Then softly, growing stronger, came the wail of multiple sirens echoing off the hills.

"You called the police?" His question was not polite. For maybe the first time, my father's outward mask disappeared. What he showed me was pure anger and betrayal.

"You wouldn't give me the gun," was all I could muster. Butterflies filled my stomach. My father began to move slowly with his walker toward the basement door some one hundred feet away. I stepped in front of him, knowing that I did not want a confrontation going into the

house where my sister was waiting. The police were called, and I was confident that they wouldn't leave without a resolution that they perceived as adequate. I could not let him slink into the basement.

Eventually what seemed like half the sheriff's department showed up. We had heard the sirens and my father had made his way about thirty feet while sticking the gun into his pocket. He was standing leaning against the storage shed. As the first officer came down the driveway with his gun drawn, a second wave of fear washed over me. Had my father fired his gun into the air to end up being shot by the officers I had sent for? It was the bulkiness of the bullet proof vest that struck me the most. I cannot remember the officer's face, but I remember how cumbersome the vest looked.

The officer asked my father, "What's going on?"

"Nothing," came the response.

"Did you call 9-1-1?" I knew the officer was directing his question to me, but he didn't take his eyes off my father.

"I asked my sister to call, yes."

"Do you have a gun, sir?" He asked my father.

Before my father could lie. I broke in.

"It's in his right front pocket."

My father scowled at me.

The officer looked at my father and said, "I'm going to reach into your pocket and get the gun."

"No, you're not," my father retorted.

"Sir, I'm taking the gun. Please don't move."

Realizing the dire nature of the showdown, knowing that my father was stubborn enough, arrogant enough, or angry enough to try to stand up to the officer, I backed away from my father, leaning on my sister's electric blue Subaru sedan. I was lightheaded and panicked.

"He can't stand up on his own. Please don't push him," I pleaded, hoping that he heard me. I was helpless and I knew that the officer could see this man was hanging onto his walker, but the guilt of putting my father into this situation was becoming more than I could bear.

As the officer reached into my father's pocket, my father stiffened. The officer gently pulled the snub nose revolver out of my father's pants pocket. I had seen this revolver so many times before. My father kept it in his drawer with either socks or underwear. I had never seen it out of that drawer before.

That is when the remaining sheriff's deputies deployed in SWAT formation down the driveway in tactical gear, sporting automatic weapons. I thought that now I was in danger as much as my father. I started to get angry that my father's cry for help (as I assumed from past readings and television that suicide attempts were) and my calling the police may have gotten both of us killed in a hail of semiautomatic gunfire. My nerves cooled substantially when the officer who was with us waved off the armored-up deputies.

My memory is hazy over the next few minutes. I remember that the officer told my father that they were taking him to the hospital. He also told my father that he did not have to wear handcuffs. My father insisted he be handcuffed. I remember the deputies surrounding this seventy-something-year-old man who could not walk without aid, one officer helping him up his driveway and putting him, handcuffed, into the back of a waiting police car, lights flashing on top. What struck me as surreal was the sight of seven or eight sheriff's cars on my father's lawn,

in the driveway, and blocking the one lane country road where he lived across from his nieces and next door to his grandchildren.

My sister was at the side porch talking to a deputy, whom I recognized as a child of a family with whom we had attended church eons ago. Another problem arose in my mind, which was the gossip network. My father always kept a certain image and his being hauled off in the back of a police car did not meet with that image. I was certain that this moment was a crushing blow to my family and the ramifications were unknowable. I hate the unknown with a purple passion.

The officer explained that the gun he had extracted from my father would have to be processed at the police station and directed us to get all the other guns out of the house. My sister gathered them up and I carried them over to my house to hide the three shotguns and other unregistered revolver that was my deceased aunt's firearm that she carried it in her big, black vinyl, southern lady pocketbook. My spouse hid the guns, wrapped in insulation, in a plumbing access panel in our bathroom. I was slightly worried about rust, but as we don't shoot guns or use guns or really want guns in the house, I didn't care if they rusted.

The next twelve hours included visits from my brother. My sister and mother staked out the hospital. My mother called me crying with updates with the most frequent one being "he still won't see us" and "you did the right thing."

The denouement to this story is neither short nor sweet. My father was admitted for observation to the psychiatric ward. The doctors discovered he had a urinary tract infection, which according to the doctor and my brother, who is in the medical field, can cause seniors to lose their every-loving minds. My father was held for observation without visitors for a while. The doctors met with us, we met with him, and we met with each other.

Beyond the awkwardness of the first meetings, I can offer you the take-aways of the big picture:

My father acted as if he was in a weekend spa instead of committed to the psychiatric ward; he was magnanimous in his benevolence; he was acting as if he was prom queen holding court. He joked with the nurses and doctors. My father acted hyper-normal. His “I’m fine and nothing’s wrong” attitude wasn’t surprising. The question on my mind was “has he hit rock bottom and is relieved he can’t go any farther down: committed for observation in a psychiatric ward, hauled off from his home in handcuffs, police called on him by his children?” I assumed he was putting on his friendly face so that the doctors would release him. My father worked for thirty-five years in hospital administration and knew how the medical system worked.

In the days that followed, I visited my father several times, once he could have visitors. Our conversations were not strained. He did seem fine. I also knew my father could hold a grudge a long time if he genuinely wanted to do so. I waited until his death for the other shoe to drop, but it never did. I had an urge to apologize when he mentioned the day where he threatened to shoot himself, but I never did. The closest that I came was to reply that “you only had to hand me the gun.” And, my father was obsessed with getting his gun back from the police. (As a note, we never did get the gun back.)

My mother, who had never been able to stand up to my father, wanted a united front. She called several “family meetings” to discuss stipulations about allowing my father to come home. Most involved his not-so-voluntary interaction with a counselor. When time came to meet with the doctor about my father’s discharge, the doctor said they all thought he was fine and that the insanity was most likely the result of urinary tract infection. We, as a family, disagreed and told the doctors collectively that they did not know how good my father was at putting on “masks” to

make others see him in a more positive light. My mother revealed that as soon as the doctors or nurses left the room, my father would become belligerent and demanding again. Basically, the doctor said he could not keep him and would refer him to a counselor.

As part of these discussions, my mother wanted us, her adult children, to refuse to allow my father to return home unless he agreed to her stipulations about how he should comport himself and the types of on-going counseling/therapy my father must undertake. Each time my mother mentioned this earlier, we, her adult children, glazed over or politely let the subject pass by. However, when she shared this ultimatum with the doctor, I spoke up. I explained to her that we, her adult children, did not have any ground upon which to tell this seventy-something-year-old man to do anything. I explained, with the doctor shaking his head yes in agreement, that the doctor could commit or release him. I explained, with my brother and sister agreeing, that any ultimatum would be between her and my father. I explained an ultimatum was a relationship issue for her and my father and the only capacity in which their children needed to be involved was to support them (her, him, and them, separately and together.)

“What we need to know is if my father is a danger to himself or others,” I said, looking at the doctor. My thoughts flashed back to my jog across the yard and the blood curdling shot. What I didn’t reveal was that I just didn’t see my father in my head, but my mother or my sister lying dead if he had truly lost his grip on reality and I waited for a second shot that never came.

“No, I don’t think so,” the doctor replied. And that was that. Life was at a new normal, with my father knowing there were lines that he could not cross without consequences. This awareness was another level of erosion from my father’s sense of control over the world he had created and lived in. He had lost his mobility. He had lost his physical prowess. He had lost power over his family.

In all the conversations I had with my father during this hospitalization and after about this incident, one thing he told me sticks out of the cesspool most. In trying to reassure me that he was not going to harm himself, he told me, “I never intended to shoot myself. I just wanted to scare them.” I assume the “them” was my mother and sister with whom he had been fighting. With this admission, which I viewed was well within his character to be a true statement of his intent, I felt absolved. If he was to be so cruel to make any of us think he had shot himself to get back at anyone for arguing with him, he deserved some sort of consequence. His disregard for anyone else’s emotional well-being confirmed long held assumptions about him. His efforts to manipulate people who were there to care for him was reprehensible. My children still do not know what happened in the yard next door that day.

*Don't take your guns to town son
Leave your guns at home Bill
Don't take your guns to town*⁴⁵

Epilogue

When we were children and my parents took us to view the bodies of dead relatives, such as my grandparents, he insisted my siblings and I touch the dead bodies. We found this act abhorrent. My mother explained that it was to let us know that the person was gone and what we saw in the casket was only what was left after when what made them who they had been was gone. My father said it was so we could “get over it” better. I never knew if better meant sooner or easier or both. When my brother, sister, and mother went to see my father in his casket at the funeral home, we were the only ones there. After much crying and sadness, we sat as a family in that room for the last time and they cried, and we laughed about how strange he was and how

⁴⁵ Cash, 1958.

good he was and how stubborn he was. I took a moment to leave them and go stand by my father's lifeless body

I touched his chest and he was not there.

I still haven't cried for my father.

*It's not time to make a change
Just relax, take it easy
You're still young, that's your fault
There's so much you must know
Find a girl, settle down
If you want you can marry
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy*

*I was once like you are now, and I know that it's not easy
To be calm when you've found something going on
But take your time, think a lot
Why, think of everything you've got
For you will still be here tomorrow, but your dreams may not*

*How can I try to explain? 'Cause when I do he turns away again
It's always been the same, same old story
From the moment I could talk I was ordered to listen
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away
I know I have to go*

*It's not time to make a change
Just sit down, take it slowly
You're still young, that's your fault
There's so much you have to go through
Find a girl, settle down
If you want you can marry
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy*

*All the times that I cried, keeping all the things I knew inside
It's hard, but it's harder to ignore it
If they were right, I'd agree, but it's them they know not me
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away
I know I have to go⁴⁶*

⁴⁶ Cat Stevens, vocalist, "Father and Son" by Cat Stevens, recorded 1969, track 5 on side 2, on *Tea for the Tillerman*, A&M Records, 33 1/3 rpm.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

My father's and my multigenerational narratives were shaped not only by events through which we lived but also by socioeconomic and geographic factors of Carter Country where we lived. I needed to explore these narratives because they are the building blocks for my life. By understanding the narratives my father passed down, I have begun the process of coming to greater understanding of how to accept the narratives in which I have lived. To understand my life, I need to understand my father's, even if only speculatively.

Looking at the stories that I assembled to create my evocative autoethnography, I am the protagonist looking outwards to his father for guidance, acceptance, and love. By weaving his story with mine, I leave you, the reader, with, if nothing else, a call to examine the narratives in and by which you live. To come to understand them will leave you with keys to unlock acceptance/and or change. The moral I leave for you is that time is short, and I implore you to identify the stories most important to you. You can choose to accept, reject, and reframe the narratives that influence the essential thought processes which determine your life.

My father's role in my stories and his life story comment on the culture from which he came. My father's narrative brims with pride in middle-class accomplishments. My father rejected the stigma from which he possibly suffered. He constructed his autobiography to define his person as hard-working, friendly, and morally upright, and he refused the possibility of psychological assistance. In crafting his life story, he reinforced the predominant white, Christian, male, middle-class narrative of self-sufficiency, religious rigor, importance of family, and independence.

My father and I had a unique relationship and I have only begun to understand the legacy I have inherited from him. My struggles to make sense of the identities we both so carefully

crafted define my life in ways that surprise me. As I reread my journey of discovery, I know that the significance of the narrative lies in learning from the retelling of what happened from point A to point B; point A is my birth and the final destination is, like my father's, the grave. At the grave and the conclusion of the story, the chance to learn is gone.

Autoethnography is a key element in helping me to find my path. As a method, autoethnography forces me to think reflexively when I may not take the time to do so in everyday waking moments. I surprise myself constantly at what I write and how I expose myself. The depths to which I can delve have only begun to be scratched. Autoethnography is a tool that I am glad to have in my writer's toolbox. The reflexive nature of autoethnography and the gaps my narrative inheritance reflection uncovered, have emphasized the importance of other time sensitive oral history projects that I want to capture and preserve in technological amber for me and my family before those stories, too, disappear.

Autoethnography is a methodology that allows those who are not elite to become part of the historical record and the examination of culture. Researchers can use autoethnography to examine their place, their influence on their culture, and their culture's influence on them. This type of examination links to oral history and "history from the bottom up."¹ Autoethnography and oral history both put the researcher/interviewer/participant squarely into their context in a search for a larger meaning of history and society. In doing so, a larger picture of culture comes into focus.

Through this project, I have synthesized the elements of the lives of me and my father. My examination of the historical context of our hometown illuminated by the socioeconomics of the mid twentieth century showed me the resilience with which my father conducted himself to

¹ Glen, 67.

rise above the circumstances of his childhood. The mountains of Carter County that defined my childhood and my perceptions of the past continue to shape my life in the present.

My father is with me when I look in the mirror or hear him in my voice. He's there when I raise my voice at my own children. He's there when I lay in bed and worry about next month's bills. He's with me when I hear him in my laugh or remember him rolling in the floor playing with my children. He is in my DNA and is in my psyche, for better and sometimes for worse. I am my father's son. He is my father. These are truths to which I long ascribe meaning.

*All the times that I cried, keeping all the things I knew inside
It's hard, but it's harder to ignore it
If they were right, I'd agree, but it's them they know not me
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away
I know I have to go²*

² Cat Stevens, "Father and Son."

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

To collect oral interviews, I submitted the proper forms to my Institutional Review Board

(IRB). The questions I gave for IRB approval were:

1. When and where did you live without running water, telephone, or electricity? For how long did you live there?
2. Think back to a time you lived without running water, telephone, or electricity. Describe a typical day. What kinds of chores did you do? What kinds of fun activities do you remember?
3. What do you remember most about not living with public utilities?
4. How did living without those public utilities make you feel?
5. Including water, electricity, and a phone line, in what order did you get each utility. How did receiving those make you feel?
6. Can you think of a time when you felt odd or bad about not having running water or electricity? What happened?
7. Think back on your neighborhood and community. Did everyone live without the utilities? What do you remember about your community during this time?
8. What are the things you remember most about living without electricity or running water?
9. Tell me about the time when your home received running water, telephone, or electricity. What do you remember most about that time? What are the things that stand out about that time? What was it like?
10. In what ways did your community change when public utilities were installed?
11. In what ways did your home life change when public utilities were installed?
12. Think of a time after your home had running water, telephone, or electricity. What was different for you and your daily routine?
13. Did everyone in your community receive public utilities at the same time?
14. Think of a time after running water, telephone, or electricity were installed in your home. Tell me about a time when you missed the way things were before running water or electricity.

15. Think of a time after running water, telephone, or electricity were installed in your home. Tell me about a time you were glad to have running water or electricity.

16. Can you think of anything else you remember you would like to share?

I was notified my proposed interviews were not under their purview. I prepared informed consent forms.

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