

2021

Simoda, West Virginia

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Recommended Citation

Ruddle, Mahala (2021) "Simoda, West Virginia," *Calliope*: Vol. 33, Article 37.
Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/calliope/vol33/iss1/37>

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Simoda, West Virginia

Mahala Ruddle

I was raised on the ridges of the Appalachian Mountains. Before I could speak or write, I was told stories. I was told stories while Mom was frying bacon, on the way back from church, while I was knee deep in mud working cattle with Dad, and in the car as we twisted up, up, up, and down, down, down the mountains that you swear were halfway up in the stars. My favorite stories come from the porch swing in the middle of July, snapping beans and killing time. My origin story goes a little like this.

My Great-Grandmother was born the same year that the Titanic sunk and Woodrow Wilson was elected President. She was running around on the tallest mountain east of the Mississippi before Alaska and Hawaii were admitted into the Union. Her name was Arveta. Her name was Granny. She was loved.

Life was good for awhile. Then, life was hard. Granny's mother, grandmother, and Aunt Bertha made the journey to Whitmer by foot on a barely there trail to go Granny's aunt's funeral. The year was 1918 and the Spanish Influenza hit and it hit hard. In Whitmer, three women said goodbye to a sister and daughter. Nobody realized that when they left their mountain home, they were exposing themselves to the very thing that killed their kin. Or maybe they did, but didn't care, who knows- maybe they felt lucky. Either way Granny's mother, Mary Artie, contracted it. It seemed like as soon as they got home on Spruce Knob, there was another funeral. This time, Granny was able to attend it. But right now, we aren't there yet. Allow me backup.

Before Granny's mother died, a 6-year-old Granny was sitting bedside, keeping a post of her mother. There were only a few hours left in Mary Artie's life and she herself knew it. It seemed like everyone knew it, but prayed they were wrong. As Granny was spending the last day with her mother, she noticed something curious, something only a child could see. Granny saw a

dark figure go along her bed, standing over her mother. Granny kicked her legs and screamed for it to “leave her mama alone”, but alas it wasn’t removed, she was. Nobody could see it, just her. As the door closed, the last glimpse she saw of her mother alive was with death literally hovering over her. Mary Artie was dead by supper time. Now ain’t that strange?

After her mother died, she was sent to live with her grandmother, Mary Susan. She was a very...harsh woman. Years of weeding the garden and scrubbing clothes went by until Granny was no longer a child. She was a young woman, and she was in love. Desperately so. But for some reason, Mary Susan didn’t like That Heltzel Boy. That didn’t matter though, not at first. It didn’t matter that her grandmother forbade her to take his last name and let him put a ring on her finger that they both wanted more than anything. They were young and in love. In theory, or at least in the movies, love always wins. But life isn’t a movie. Soon enough, Mary Susan won. Granny found herself in the rearview mirror with a baby in her belly that The Heltzel Boy didn’t know about when Mary Susan pushed hard enough that she got what she wanted.

Being a single mother in a small community was scandalous. Her own mother felt that burden, and now, it was hers to bear. Granny soon found herself with 5 more children, and no support. My small town ate her alive for a fault that was none her own. For that, I will never forgive them. But that’s not my story to tell. Granny worked and worked and worked. She did the job of a mother and father, loving her children more than anything on Heaven and Earth. Every field she planted, every bucket of water she hauled, and wood split was for Elwood, Hallie, Pete, Ralph, Paul, Annabell, and ipso facto me.

Don’t get it twisted. The hardships she endured never jaded her. She was the kindest woman I’ve ever had the privilege of knowing. During the ‘85 flood, Mom and Granny had a freezer full of food and no electricity. Seneca Creek didn’t swallow them alive like it did some. Granny sent my Mom to go house to house and invite everyone over for supper. While friends and neighbors feasted, they forgot about the rain taking everything (and for some, everyone) away from them. For a moment, they were able to sit at a table and pretend that life was okay until Arevta and Kim’s freezer was empty. During one of their suppers, they heard a knock on the door. It was the guy from the Salvation Army cantina. He said something like this- “Ma’am,

please stop cooking, I can't pass out hotdogs when you're putting out good food." His protests lasted long until he got a belly full of food. She was the best cook. I still use her bread recipe.

I could go on for ages about Granny. I could talk about her wicked sense of humor. I could tell you about when Cousin Kevin asked "grandmother" (he was the only one of us to call her that, but that was Kevin) about what she thought about his dyed red hair and without missing a beat, she said "it looks like a skunk pissed on it". I could tell you about how she spoiled my siblings and I rotten. I could tell you her triumphs and how she taught her children to work hard and get an education. I could tell you that it nearly killed her when she had to bury her son and 2 of her grandsons. I could tell you about the nights where she was exhausted and broke and at the end of her rope, but she got up and put on her boots with the earth coming through the soles and went to work the next morning. I could tell you about how she stepped up and raised my mother when she didn't have to. I could tell you how she fought like hell against cancer. She won the first battle, and lost the second. My Uncles could tell you about the bottle of Black Velvet whisky she kept under the sink for them when they were young, and about how the lines in her face smoothed out and her laugh was even more infectious when they made cider. I could tell you all of this and more.

Everyone lost Granny when she died. It was the kind of hurt that is visceral and real. It cuts through everything. The woman that was everyone's, and I mean everyone's, Granny was gone. I used to be worried that I would forget what she looked like. And one day, when I'm 93 like she was, I very well might forget. However, I will never forget the stories that I was told, the same stories I will tell my future children and God willing, my children's children. I will tell myself these stories until they are threadbare and worn like the quilts she made from scraps to keep her family warm. I will remember her. She has become your Granny now, too. Please tell me that you will remember her. Her name was Arveta.