



‘Fight, Sing, Drink, Pray’

A Journey to the Heart of the South’s Scots-Irish

THAT PHRASE – “FIGHT, SING, DRINK, PRAY” – IS THE SUMMING MOTTO OF AUTHOR/SENATOR JIM WEBB IN CHARACTERIZING THE PEOPLE WHOSE HERITAGE HE SHARES. HIS BOOK AND THE RECENT DOCUMENTARY IT SPAWNED INSPIRED WRITER SUE EISENFELD TO SET OFF INTO SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA IN SEARCH OF LIVING, BREATHING – AND SOMETIMES FIGHTING AND DRINKING – EXAMPLES.

by Sue Eisenfeld • Photos by Laurie McClellan

A bass player at an outdoor jam in the Virginia mountains manifests at least several qualities attributed to the Scots-Irish: patriotism in the cap, determination in the eye and music in the soul.

“POOR PEOPLE CAN SHOW YOU how to have a good time,” Whitey Taylor tells me. The racetrack owner and evangelical preacher is explaining that the folks who come to his Franklin County Speedway in Callaway, Va., include mostly “blue-collar people and rednecks,” usually 1,500 to 2,000 each Saturday night.

The night I attend is low on race cars and crowds, but it still draws some regulars. The woman behind me, cheering with her kids for all the drivers on a familiar first-name basis, attends just about every week. It draws in once-in-a-whilers too, like Wanda Wray, a lifetime resident of Franklin County, and her fiancé, both tanned, slightly drunk and having a blast.

The tension of drivers outmaneuvering one another, the mosaic of Mohawked kids in tie-dye t-shirts, the museum of tattoos on all sizes and shapes of sunburned flesh, and the fist fight that breaks out among a few bare-chested young men in the stands all add up to an evening’s entertainment, for sure. Taylor’s unhappy with this particular day, however, because it didn’t include as much exciting “shoving and gouging” and bumper-to-bumper contact as usual.

I’m here at the speedway as part of my journey to experience and understand the not-frequently-understood and often under-self-identified group of people known as the Scots-Irish (or Scotch-Irish). Roanoke

native David “Mudcat” Saunders has directed me here, explaining that the speedway is at the heart of the “Scots-Irish nation of southwest Virginia.

“It’s Scots-Irish through and through,” he says.

Saunders, a self-proclaimed “hillbilly,” explains that fast cars stem from running liquor – and running from the law. Franklin County has been considered the Moonshine Capital of the World, and aside from running “white lightning” in and out of the mountain hollows the quickest, whomever could outrun the cops became the heroes and celebrities in their communities. Then the bootleggers began building race cars in their own back yards and racing each other at small

tracks. This small-time activity turned into NASCAR. But don’t get Saunders started on NASCAR.

“NASCAR no longer represents our culture,” he says of the venture that has morphed into big-business and big-celebrity. “Going to Callaway is like going back 50 years.”

MY VISIT to southwest Virginia also involves music. I want to hear true Appalachian-made music inspired by the Scottish fiddle and the African-based banjo. According to Roddy Moore, director of the Blue Ridge Institute, which documents the folk heritage of the area, southwest Virginia is “the heart of old-time music, the center of the universe.” I pay a



At Floyd Country Store, one attendee at the Friday Nite Jamboree asserts that most of those present are of Scots-Irish heritage.

visit to Floyd, Va., to the famous Friday Night Jamboree at the Floyd Country Store.

Though I've been warned that Floyd (pop. 432) has become "metropolitan" over the past few decades, with outsiders moving in, half the audience is made up of old-timers, who know to arrive early for gospel hour. Later, when the old-time string band Roscoe P & Coal Train gets going, dozens of people of all ages flock to

"Going to Callaway is like going back 50 years," says self-proclaimed 'hillbilly' David 'Mudcat' Saunders, speaking in reference to NASCAR, which "no longer respresents our culture."

the wooden dance floor wearing taps and flat-footing, clogging, and square dancing in all kinds of get-ups, from spike heels and sequins to denim overalls and Rebel baseball caps, dancing the same steps that have been danced in Appalachia since the 18th century. When I ask the wife of a bass player in a jam session the origin of most of the people in the area and attending this night, she doesn't hesitate: "Scots-Irish."

The Blue Ridge Institute in Ferrum, Va., is on my agenda as well. Though its recreated farmstead (log cabin, barn, blacksmith's shop, and summer kitchen) is based on the German influence in the region, the

type of lifestyle it depicts – with women dressed in clothes from 1800, churning butter and making apple crisp in the fireplace – is reminiscent of the mountain life that the Scots-Irish, Irish, and others lived as well, when they settled the Blue Ridge. In fact, the mountain lifestyle portrayed at the Blue Ridge Institute isn't that foreign or far away to anyone born around here.

"I'm only one generation away from all this," Kristina Stump, a lifelong Ferrum resident of English-Irish and German descent, tells me. Some of the ladies working in the log cabin converse about the methods they still continue today to make butter at home, like using clabbered milk – yogurt-like soured milk, brought to the south by the Scots-Irish.

VIRGINIA SENATOR JIM WEBB famously made a journey into the heart of the Scots-Irish nation when he traced his lineage to a place called Alley Hollow in southwest Virginia and also back to Ireland and Scotland. In his 2004 book, "Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America," and the 2011 documentary of the same name that aired on the Smithsonian Channel, he traces the history of the Scots-Irish of Appalachia and elsewhere in an effort to explain the characteristics, culture, and contributions of this group in America – what he describes as "insistent individualism" and "infinite stubbornness," "uncomplaining self-reliance," "refusal to be dominated from above," "a tradition of fighting for freedom and fairness," "a culture founded on guns," "the very heartbeat of fundamentalist Christianity," and "the



core character of the nation's working class."

He suggests that those of Scots-Irish origin continue to exhibit some of the defining characteristics their ancestors brought from overseas: "One of this culture's great strengths is that it persistently refused to recognize human worth in terms of personal income and assets," he writes. In addition, members of this culture "don't particularly care what others think of them," "are probably the most anti-authoritarian culture in America," and maintain "an unwritten but historically consistent code of personal honor and individual accountability." Also men "should know how to hunt and fish and camp, and thus survive."

Webb explains that "the Scots-Irish did not merely come to America, they became America," weaving into the fabric of all classes and cultures. At least 12 American presidents have been of Scots-Irish descent, including Andrew Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant, Woodrow Wilson, Richard Nixon, and Bill Clinton. Jefferson Davis, George S. Patton, and John McCain are among the many Scots-Irish leaders of the nation. Neil Armstrong was Scots-Irish, and many of our entertainers and artists – Johnny Carson, John Wayne, Johnny Cash, Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, Elizabeth Taylor, and John Steinbeck – share this heritage.

But, he says, "modern America has forgotten who they were (and are) so completely that it is rare to find anyone [of Scots-Irish descent] who can even recognize their ethnic makeup..."

Indeed, the first few people I talk to in southwest Virginia give answers like this when I ask if they are

of Scots-Irish descent:

"I don't know if I'm Irish or Scots-Irish."

"I thought all the people in Appalachia were Scots-Irish."

"I don't know how to separate how we lived from what our heritage was."

"We're English-Irish."

"Around here, Irish and Scots-Irish are all the same."

Even Roddy Moore, who focuses more on the German influence in the area, answers by saying, "Probably." He points out that Appalachia, like everywhere else in America, is a melting pot.

"My culture needs to rediscover itself," Webb says.

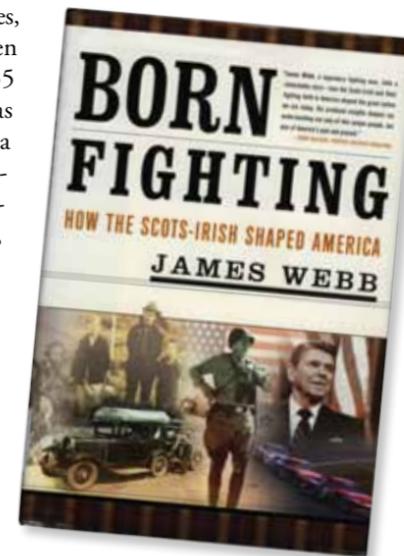
WHEN THE PROTESTANT SCOTS-IRISH first came to America in the early 1700s, they were known simply as the Irish, as they had come from the northern region of Ireland. Not until the Irish Catholics came to the United States in the 1840s due to the Potato Famine did the Scots-Irish decide to coin a name for themselves.

Their roots stem from the lowlands of today's Scotland (as well as Northern England). That was where the Scots-Irish ancestors, the Celtic tribes, repelled the Roman Empire, which had taken over nearly everywhere else in Europe, from 55 B.C. through the early centuries A.D. It was where the tribes, or clans, in an army led by a commoner of their own, fought for their independence from England in the early 13th century. It was where in the early 1600s, the poor, starving, "hard-bitten," "unbending," "tightly knit," "warlike" Scots, who had subsisted on infertile, over-farmed land for centuries, began the first wave of crossing the sea to populate the northern province of Ireland (Ulster), part of the king's plan to stop their warring in Scotland and rid Ireland of the Catholics. But history shows that these Scots had no allegiance to the crown, only to their clan, and this new land was where they would become dissenters, fighting for the right to practice their bishop-less, pope-less, king-less faith, and fighting against new laws barring them from voting, bearing arms, serving in the military, or being married or baptized in the Anglican church.

When the Scots wore a red kerchief around their neck as a symbol of their protest against the crown and church, they were called, for the first time, "rednecks."

Between 1717 and 1775, at least 250,000 Scots-Irish fled to the colonies, welcomed first to the wilderness of Pennsylvania where, in return for freedom of worship, they were expected to fight off the Indians. Later they headed for the mountains in all the states encompassing Appalachia, a place that was familiar and private and far away from the British aristocracy that ruled the

Part of the Scots-Irish-inspired music is that it draws in visitors from afar, such as this couple dancing in Floyd.



James Webb (aka U.S. Senator Jim Webb of Virginia) explored the Scots-Irish heritage in the book that has been made into a Smithsonian Channel documentary movie.

APPALACHIA VS THE WORLD

Kristina Stump explains how it feels to be from Appalachia: "The rest of the world is the outside world. They don't understand who we are. City people still think we don't have electricity or running water." Even in the local area, she feels the local culture is misunderstood. "Take the moonshine aspect," she says. "Stills still get busted up. There are still raids. The ABC thinks we're criminals, but it's a traditional thing, not a criminal thing." The Scots-Irish have been making whiskey all the way back to their ancient Celtic roots and have been bootlegging since 1644, when Scotland levied its first whiskey taxes. She says people willingly come to court when they're busted, serve their time, and then resume making the family recipe all over again.

"They also think our accent doesn't make us sound very smart," she says of urbanites. In reality, the southern mountain dialect, which those not familiar with the origin of its rhythms and nuances think sounds foreign or "dumb," reflects, according to historians and linguists, a "survival of early English rather than a degradation of language" – a "Scottish-flavored Elizabethan English," "garnished with Middle English remnants from the time of Chaucer," with grammar and syntax and vocabulary unadulterated by outside influences, due in part to the isolation of the mountains. Often, the very items picked on by "outsiders" as being improper English are actually older language patterns that were once considered standard in the British Isles. –SE

colonies from the northeastern and Mid-Atlantic coast.

They built log homes and garden plots in the hills and hollows, away from the mainstream, set up their whiskey stills, sang and played music, told stories, kept their own militias in case they needed them, integrated with the English, Irish, Welsh, German, Swiss, French, and others who came to populate the area, and lived self-sufficiently off the land. In some counties in Virginia, where the Scots-Irish had a leg up on some of the other groups by speaking English, they were the first to establish private schools and churches, according to Mary Kegley, a researcher and genealogist in Wythe County, Va.

When the Scots-Irish heard the call for men to take up arms against the British, they – the grandsons and great-grandsons of those who suffered the abuses of the throne, who believed in the individual's right to rebel against unjust policies – took their well-honed backwoods fighting tactics and came out in droves to fight the American Revolution. In addition to soldiers, when the government passed its first alcohol tax, to pay for the war, they became moonshiners as well.



The Blue Ridge Institute in Ferrum, Va., stores parts of an old still.



AGAIN, ABOUT A CENTURY LATER, when it came time to fight against what they perceived as the ruling class imposing themselves on others, the dirt-poor mountain men – nary a slaveholder among them, and hardly any of them property owners either, according to Webb's book – formed the bulk of the Confederate Army and died the bulk of Confederate deaths.

Like other Europeans in this country, the Scots-Irish dispersed and are found everywhere in America today, and a few centuries of intermarriage has watered down the Scots-Irish genetic stock. This is not a group that can be distinctly named or identified anymore, as "something-hyphen-American," like so many groups that derive from somewhere else. Webb asserts that those Scots-Irish who know who they are aren't even interested in putting an ethnic label on themselves.

But whomever it is that the Scots-Irish have become in modern America – along with all the others that settled in Appalachia – there is still a rich and distinct Appalachian mountain culture that the Scots-Irish helped create.

The region is known for its music, its dances, its crafts, its storytelling, its agriculture, and its unspoiled rural beauty. And those from here tend to stay here. Most folks from the area will tell you that the people who live here are clannish. Reunions are frequent and popular in mountain families, large gatherings of multiple generations, who all live nearby. "Ninety percent of my relatives live in my county," says Felicia Woods of Ferrum, Va., whose roots are Irish, German, Cherokee, and possibly Melungeon.

"When I was growing up," she says, "it was considered disrespectful of the family to move away. You wouldn't move further than an afternoon visit, or you'd have forsaken your family."

When the settlers found their way to Appalachia, they knew they had found terra firma.

I'VE BEEN TOLD time and time again that young people are not interested in learning about their roots, however. They don't live in multi-generational households as much anymore, and they don't hear the stories being passed down from the generations. They don't know their great-grandfather's name, nor where or how their ancestors lived, and they don't care.

Older people care more. Researcher and genealogist Mary Kegley can tell you. She says mostly people over 50 or 60 have acquired an interest; they also have the time and money to travel to other places and research their family histories. Kegley has researched and published more than 500 family sketches and helped hundreds – if not thousands – of people with their genealogy projects. She unearths church, land, and immigration records to help people answer questions about their ancestors in America: birth, marriage, and death dates, land ownership.

The tiny, old buildings of historical societies and libraries in the Blue Ridge Mountain counties I've visited are lined with bound volumes of family histories that people have researched and published on their own. People spend years – decades, generations – tracing their ancestors as far back as the breadcrumbs lead, before the log cabins and the racetracks and the stereotypes: from the living to the dead, to the first settlers on American soil, to the boat that first carried them across the sea to a new life.

In the end, though, not everyone can find the far-away place – the county, the town – that once, a long, long time ago, in another age, on the British Isles, was considered home. The paper trail ends, too many people's ancestors' names are the same, and ultimately, that place – the past, who you once were – is so distant, it can only be considered a foreign land. ❧

Above: Franklin County (Va.) Speedway attracts between 1,500 and 2,000 people per race night.

Left: Whitey Taylor is owner of the Franklin County Speedway in Callaway, Va., and an evangelical street preacher.