Jim Ross

They All Come Back

I start down the steepest of the hills. The asphalt roads are still torn up from winter's successive snowfalls and saltings. Potholes turn a simple walk into an obstacle course. Does the county's budget for pothole filling include our rural roads? Lots of people still blame Obama for road conditions. They pin anything they can on him.

To the left, on the fringes of my land, I pass the intact stone foundations of an abandoned springhouse. Five strides from it are partial foundations of an even older springhouse. How long ago were they built? When were they abandoned? The immediate area was still actively farmed in the early 1970s, though I can't see enough contiguous, cleared land for anybody to have farmed efficiently. And I'm not aware of any older homes that, pre-electricity, might have required a springhouse. Had the springhouses been used mostly by farm workers? How long does it take for an inactive farm to overgrow and return to forest?

Just beyond the springhouse, in a glen filled with daffodils a month ago, are several day lilies. A deer carcass dumped near the lilies reeks. Fifty yards downhill, the springhouse's above-ground frame looks like a hurricane tossed it there, so we call it "Dorothy's house." The walls still look solid, but its metal roof is holey from rust and is folding in on itself. For a while, we'd talked about restoring the least antediluvian springhouse. Replacing the above-ground shelter would be the easy part. Restoring full functionality would be the challenge. Who knows, are the same underground streams still accessible for refrigeration?

What am I doing out here, anyway? I need to get my head together, get my shit together, before we drive 182 miles in a few days to sit down with a surgeon and agree on a plan for fusing four vertebrae in my neck. With great trepidation I let myself contemplate the prospect of major surgery. General anesthesia poses risks no matter what the type of surgery. I'm confident in the surgeon, but not confident in my body's ability to heal. With osteoporosis, I've got to be at greater risk for fusion failure. And then what? Is there even a "then what?" to talk about?

After a hairpin turn, I ascend a slow, steep hill, descend two, and ascend one to the white 1920's farmhouse with enclosed front porch on the left and a red barn on the right. The red barn and white house grant refuge to cats, dogs, goats, calves, a pony, and thick-

headed Dunkin the Donkey who can't get it into his head that the pony has no damned interest in his advances. A log cabin next to the red barn was constructed thirty years ago by moving two old churches to form two-storied end pieces. The middle, where the kitchen is located, was added to connect them.

The cabin's occupant, Jean, is a retired local English teacher who became the center of controversy in 1973 when she encouraged her students to order books from the *Scholastic Magazine* booklist. Parents wanted her driven out of town. In sync, the school board said she couldn't return for a third year because, after three, she'd have tenure. Parents were riled up because reading made children question the way things have always been done and aspire to the possibility of leaving Appalachia. The School Board's attorney said some of her teachings violated State law. Flash forward a year when the Class of 1974 demanded, "We want her as commencement speaker." The School Board said, "No way." Students retorted, "Then there'll be no commencement." The students got their wish. Meanwhile, Jean retained an attorney and sued the School Board in Federal court. *Scholastic Teacher Magazine* carried her story in the April/May 1974 issue: "A Teacher vs. a Town." After four embattled years, Jean won. Unhappy about having to take her back, the School Board initially assigned her to teach English as a second language. She had only one student, a Vietnamese boy, and she was given a small storage room in lieu of a classroom. After a rewarding career, Jean retired in 1993 and has lived in the log cabin since 2005. One of her former students, who lives across the road and up in the hill, restored and owns the log cabin.

A few rolling hills away, I'm about to pass Tom's house on the left up a long forty-degree driveway. Tom grew up nearby, near the Cacapon River, but when time came to find a job, he moved one state over, where he married, raised a family, and had a long career. Anticipating retirement, he built a house here so he could "come back home." Nearly every year, Tom has a productive vegetable garden and, if all goes well, by early September, he'll be standing by the side of the road handing out tomatoes to passersby. Once, knowing I'd be walking by, I took a small plastic bag with me and Tom said, "I'm done eatin' any more of those tomatoes. They're past their prime. Take all you can carry away."

A couple minutes later I reach a T-intersection dividing into three parts an old farm that every spot of land in sight once belonged to. About 400 acres stay cleared, though nothing but hay is growing. The old log-cabin farmhouse at the corner left got spiffed up for the new owner, Matt, who moved from the city five years ago. The former owners upgraded to a big house on a great expanse across the road. They claim they plan to start raising calves any day now. They've

already readied a barn. At the moment, they're focusing on other businesses operated in-State. Here for generations, this family knows how to follow the curve.

Matt, the émigré from the city, is out in his little garden plot putting metal mesh and wood frame cages—beamed, to look like houses—around new plantings to fend off critters.

"Moles took our beets last year. Just like on cartoons, they plow a hole from beneath and suck 'em down," he says.

"Same thing happened to us," I say. "Except they left us the candy cane beets."

"Our big disappointment was the corn. Across the road, we planted an acre, built a fence ten foot high to keep out deer. Just as the corn's inviting us to harvest, squirrels descended and took it all," he says.

My friend Martin recently pointed out that, when he had his knees replaced, they basically cut off his legs at the knees, and then reattached them. Should I expect as much with my neck surgery? Because that's the image I have: they're going to cut my head off, suck out all the rotten disks, replace them with cadaver bone, and then re-attach my head. It doesn't work that way, you say? That doesn't matter. That's the picture I'm carrying.

I resume walking down a long, flat road. To my left there's a drunk-looking, post-and-barbed-wire fence draped in vines; to my right, there's a newly installed perimeter fence. The contrast between the two fences says a lot about what's going on around here. I turn left, up toward the old church cemetery. My eyes trip on an electioneering sign to my left "VOTE NO HUTCHINSON NO WAY" and then a gravestone to my right marked "Hutchinson." Kind of late to protest, I joked with myself.

An older woman slouches under the cemetery's gazebo, looking inward. I approach. She's wearing a simple yellow housedress with blue latticework floral design. Her grey, matted hair has outlived numerous stylists. I sit catty-cornered on the L-shaped bench. After thirty seconds, I ask, "You got somebody here?"

“They’re all spread out; Murch, Mandrake, Thomas,” she says, pointing successively in the general direction of each family plot.

“Good to have a place you call home,” I say.

“My sister’s ashes they’re bringing over from Winchester. That’s what I’m waiting for. They’re gonna bury her with our mother. Another sister’s ashes I’ve got at home in Frederick. I don’t know why she’s still there. I’m kinda attached to having her around, I guess. You think that’s weird?” she asks.

“Naw,” I say. “I’ve still got Ma’s ashes at home in the living room. And Dad’s in my brother’s den—except for what I took to Scotland and sprinkled in a garden. Dad always wanted to visit Scotland and now he has. He could never get Ma to travel. Couldn’t get her to talk about cemeteries either. She’d just walk away.”

“At least we know this is where we end up,” she says. “All of us’ve left the area to find jobs and raise families, but we all come back. Without fail.”

“Anyone open the ground yet, so your sister can join your mother?” I ask.

“Come to think of it, I rightly don’t know. I didn’t look,” she says. “Wouldn’t that be a laugh if people came all this way and nobody’d dug a hole.”

“You remember what was in this spot?”

“Sure do,” she says. “This was my church. Lots of the people you’re lookin’ at were there the day in 1984 it burned down, me included. There’d been a church on this spot over 100 years.”

“The sign remembers that: ‘Mt. Nebo Church: 1881 to 1984,’” I say. I want to ask whether somebody burned the church down on purpose, but instead I ask, “Was there any talk about rebuilding?”

“For a little while—you had to talk about it,” she says, “but it’s not so easy to replace 100 years of what happened between those walls. And it was a community church. Used to be, everybody was here. That was already ending when the church burned down. That community’s is all spread out now. And the church? Ain’t half o’ nothin’ left. See those steps? That’s all there is. A couple o’ steps goin’ nowhere.”

“Something I’ve been wondering about, over there, that structure like a picnic area where people might eat standing up. What was that? Was it affiliated with the community church?”

“It was more community than church,” she says, “but it was all one and the same. We had potlucks there, right next to the cemetery.

Families, all together. You're lookin' at what's left of an old shanty. It had a stove. We cooked hot dogs and burgers. And people brought whatever they could—potato salad, sliced tomatoes—the best tomatoes grew here—ham 'n beans, or a nice warm peach pie. This was peach and apple country, y'know."

"I know it, I've seen the processing plant over in Pawpaw," I say.

"Shut down now. Shut down when lots of boys were being sent to Vietnam. Lots of jobs vanished when the peach and apple business left," she says.

"Did they hold potlucks after Sunday church?" I ask.

"Then but not only," she says. "Sunday's a day of rest, not that you could really stop pickin' if the time'd come. Whenever people felt it was time to get together, that's what we did.

"You got a name for this place?" I ask.

"Oh, it has a beautiful name. We called it The Festival. Everything, the shanty and the picnic area around it, it was all part of The Festival.

"What was it like as a kid? I ask.

"Hearing the words 'The Festival' meant magic. It still does. Nobody in these parts had much of anything. They mined silica, worked the mills, ran small farms, worked the orchards, some had jobs at hotels in town. Some had home industries, too. That place—the very idea of The Festival—it meant everything. Knowing all winter that come spring you'd get an ice cream at The Festival meant the world to a child—and not just to a child. "

"Is it all just memories now? I ask.

"Not much's left of The Festival, but there's more Festival than church. Just a skeleton—still standing, though," she says.

"Looks kind of like the skeleton of beached whale," I say.

"And what would a whale be doin' at our cemetery?" she laughs.

Two women and a man in their twenties, all in jeans, are walking toward us after parking by The Festival.

"See, I was right. The others are coming," she says.

After quick introductions, she turns to face me: "I appreciate your sittin' and waitin'."

"My pleasure. I enjoyed meeting the folks, above ground and below," I say. "I better be runnin' on before I lose my head."

Jim Ross

Transition from Old to New