Innocence and Experience in Surry County

by Geoffrey Clarfield (May 2025)

Appalachian Fiddle & Bluegrass Association mural (D. E. Johnson, 1978)

Whenever and wherever I travel in the United States, I try my best to visit places where Alan Lomax and others like him recorded the traditional music of this vast country. And so this spring, together with my wife (who did not mind antiquing in North Carolina) we arrived in Mount Airy, Surry County, North Carolina, just a few miles shy of the southern border of the state of Virginia.

It was a beautiful sunny spring day in March, a bit cold but the sky was blue, and we were wearing our early spring Canadian attire and so we were dressed for the weather. We stayed in the Newton/Hickory area and once our GPS got us to the highway to Mount Airy, we could admire the countryside.

The highway is a well paved two-way road going one way north and one way south on the other side of a boulevard filled with trees so high and so thick that you can barely see the traffic on the other side.

Occasionally, you pass over a river on a bridge, where you can see the hills of the foothills before the Blue Ridge Mountains. The Blue Ridge itself beckons high on the horizon.

The young adult who still lives inside of me instantly imagines stopping the car, putting on a knapsack and walking up and down these steep forested canyons with their sparkling river rapids for hours at a time, carrying food and tents with friends and at the end of six hours of hiking setting up camp on the crest of a hill where all you see for miles is trees, trees, ridges and then some.

I used to do this kind of thing decades ago, but I would have to be in much better shape to consider doing that today and I would not go anywhere without a good guide. I have seen the Bill Bryson film “A Walk in the Woods” and do not need an Andy Griffith like character to warn me that such an adventure is not “a simple walk in the park.”

We had got up early, the car was packed and by mid-morning we were hungry and so, we filled up our car with gas at a local station and had ourselves a southern breakfast at the Cracker Barrel; coffee, tea, orange juice, bacon and eggs and the inevitable grits and gravy with lovely muffins.

The walls were filled with pictures from the past and ads that advertised “Nunn’s Shoe brand,” “Sonny Sugar Cones,” and other brands from a past that is only remembered through the lens of nostalgia, as North Carolina was deindustrialized after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Its manufacturing sector was outsourced to Mexico and the Far East transforming many once thriving small weaving towns in this state into decaying places racked by crime, addiction to

fentanyl and government subsidies.

That is changing as the cities are reindustrializing and the picturesque towns are gentrifying and attracting retirees and young couples. But pockets of impoverished small towns dot the state.

Our server was local and spoke with a lovely southern lilt. She seemed genuinely interested in serving us and making sure we were satisfied. This is institutionalized southern hospitality, but it is also characteristic of rural places where jobs are scarce, and people are proud to be employed and of service. She noticed that my hoodie was blue. She smiled and said, “The color of North Carolina,” and then took our order.

I have experienced the same attitude in southern Ontario but with a lot less smiles. And before you know it, we entered the town of Mount Airy, speaking of Andy Griffith who was born and raised here.

We arrived at our Air B&B, a small bungalow, and before you could blink your eyes entered a tastefully decorated small house, with a large American flag fluttering from the front porch, with beds covered in Appalachian style quilts and believe it or not, tasteful photos of Andy and all the characters of that long lasting popular show that captured the hearts of middle America and Canada in the late fifties and early sixties.

The Andy Griffith Show is set in the small Appalachian town of Mayberry, which is really a Hollywood version of Mount Airy where Andy the actor was born and raised. In this series that comprised more than two hundred episodes, Andy plays a widowed police officer in a small town, surrounded by colorful local types who live both inside and outside of the law.

Andy, with southern charm and tact, must find a way to bring everyone back to a lawful life with as much local wisdom and

what we now call local knowledge, social and emotional intelligence as he can muster.

Like so many Hollywood creations of the time his wife has mysteriously died (remember Bonanza with a Chinese immigrant cook standing in for a dead mother?) and he has a wonderful and comic relationship with his family and peers, for as he keeps the law, he also has to explain custom and convention, right and wrong to his young son.

And so he is on the side of civilization on two counts, among his peers and for the coming generation, his ten-year-old son.

His aunt Bee keeps house and is the maternal presence in what is both at home and at the police station a life lived mostly among men. And of course that is why we see that Andy would rather be out fishing with his son and friends, but unfortunately, he must work for a living in a working-class town with a lot of poor rural farmers who live in Surry County.

He works to live. He does not live to work and that adds to the attractiveness of the show’s basic concept. Would that we could all be like that, no doubt my parents’ generation opined, who had recently experienced WWII and the Great Depression before it.

And of course Sheriff Andy does have a love interest, a drop dead gorgeous, but demure, Appalachian type whom he eventually marries before leaving to start a different show as a lawyer in one of the big cities of the Piedmont in NC. It is said that for five years the two of them had what can only be referred to tongue in cheek as an “off and on-again intimate relationship,” off screen that is.

And so when you drive and walk around town you will see signs that say “Mayberry” this and “Mayberry that” so often that it is easy to get confused about whether the real Mount Airy was named after Mayberry or, the other way around. There is also a local Andy Griffith Theater for the Performing Arts here.

Among musicians who play what is now called Roots Music or Americana, Surry county looms large. This is where Alan Lomax recorded local singers and fiddlers such as Bascar Lamar Lunsford (who started the first folk music festival in Asheville NC in 1929) as well as the great Tommy Jarrell and some remarkable female ballad singers.

Lomax brought a film crew here in the 1980s and created a full episode of his PBS American Patchwork series on traditional American music called Appalachian Journey. It is always worth re-watching.

A bit before this, during the early 1960s, Alan’s friend,

Pete Seeger’s half-brother Mike Seeger, came up to Surry county where he and countless other folk music revivalists from the sixties sat at the feet of masters like Jarrell and Lunsford, while performing with other urbanites in ensembles like the New Lost City Ramblers, who brought both Old Time and Blue Grass music to a generation of college age and teenage urban Americans and Canadians (like me) with no roots in the south or Appalachia.

Both Pete and Mike Seeger, as well as Lomax, were major influencers of the young upcoming singer songwriter, Bob Dylan.

Young upstarts like Seeger in turn turned their teachers into national music stars including the likes of Boone based Doc Watson whose festival Merlefest, now brings hundreds of thousands of visitors to Boone NC each year for a three-day series of concerts of traditional music, as well as traditionally inclined singer song writers and revivalists such as the Carolina Chocolate Drops.

Nevertheless, the severe approach of the Temperance movement still permeates this festival. No alcoholic beverages are allowed at the festival site and festival attendants are allowed to inspect your cooler and bottles to make sure that visitors do not reproduce the moonshining that once made this area both famous and infamous during the 1930s, as impoverished local farmers like the esteemed Jarell and Lunsford kept the speakeasies of Chicago well supplied with their local brew.

During prohibition local bootleggers also souped up their cars to beat their police followers, giving eventual rise to the lucrative and now world-famous sport of Nazcar racing.

The music of Surry county has influenced bands like the Grateful Dead and countless other performers from the Atlantic to the Pacific, whose only real contact with these traditions

is when they tour the south, after having internalized and transformed its traditional music into mass media. Indeed this small county, musically speaking, punches way above its weight.

Lomax's father and mentor John was decades ahead of the game and recorded for the Library of Congress both white and Black Appalachian banjo players and singers here as far back as the 1930s. These recordings are slowly returning to the festivals where they are reworked by contemporary artists and these festivals now dot the countryside from May through October. The Carolina Chocolate Drops are just one and I had the pleasure of hosting them for a tour of the Lomax Archive when I worked there more than a decade ago.

Meanwhile, since soon after the start of radio in the 1920s, Ralph Epperson established the WPAQ radio station in Mount Airy which broadcasts both secular and religious Old Time and Blue Grass styled music.

The station has amassed a large collection of vinyl records of performers from Appalachia and has hosted a live broadcast from the Earle Theater on the main street of Mount Airy every Saturday morning, for almost as long as Tennessee's Grand Ole Opry has been in existence.

And that ladies and gentlemen, is one of the prime reasons I showed up there in the front seat of the Earle Theater to watch and hear the weekly Saturday morning Merry Go Round that is broadcast live and that can be heard simultaneously on radio and on the internet.

In preparation for this pilgrimage I listened to a lot of WPAQ in Newton, heard a lot of preachers preaching and was able to hear a Gospel band singing about Flying Saucers as a sign from God that the "rapture" may soon come among us. Indeed, the line between sacred and profane in this region is not obvious to outsiders, as I may have incorrectly thought the song was

intended to be humorous.

But before I describe those two hours of American musical heaven at the Merry Go Round (with two more later down the street of a different more participatory kind), let me return to Andy Griffith.

Most North Americans who did not grow up in and around Appalachia and the south were first introduced to Blue Grass and Old-Time music on the Andy Griffith Show. Andy had a BA in music, was a good guitarist and singer and made sure that the Blue Grass band called The Darlings on the show (their actual name was the Dillards) got to perform some fine numbers. You can find them on YouTube. (Later in his career, he recorded a CD of Christian hymns which earned him a Grammy).

That is where and when I first heard bluegrass and to be honest, the time soon after when I first heard the virtuosic banjo of Earl Scruggs on the Hollywood created TV show the Beverly Hillbillies (the actor who plays Jed Clampet appears as one of the characters in an earlier Andy Griffith episode). It was a prime-time TV series about an Appalachian family who strikes oil on their farm and moves to upscale Beverly Hills.

I did not like it as much as I did the more homespun Andy Griffith Show because it followed the vaudeville stereotypes of ignorant rural southerners, whereas as a child, I learnt something from the homespun wisdom of Andy Griffith and the good people of Mayberry. I liked the characters there better. They seemed real to me.

And so, on Saturday morning at ten thirty, I showed up at the Earle Theatre for the Saturday Morning Merry Go Round. It is not the high season so in a hall long narrow hall with a stage that can seat a few hundred people we numbered no more than twenty. And of course I got a front row seat with extra leg room.

The first band was called the Twin County Ramblers. They are

all in their late seventies perhaps early eighties with a young man who played guitar. There were two fiddlers, two guitarists and a banjo player who looked like an aging Daniel Boone and spoke like he must have, with a deep raspy Appalachian mountain accent.

Some of the performers wore overalls and they all wore hats except for the female guitarist who wore a pink shirt with shoes with matching pink laces. Most of the men wore cowboy boots, mountain hats and vests.

They had been playing together for years and alluded to that and sang a series of songs by Charlie Poole, with some mumbled commentary as some of the performers were descendants of his family and had a tale or two to tell such as that concerning his sudden demise.

Well Charlie was a Rambling Man. He got his start working in a textile factory and due to his gifted playing and singing was soon a local and even statewide phenomena, playing at parties and events and being a confirmed womanizer often outstaying his stay as someone on stage obliquely put it.

Well Charlie liked to drink and ironically one of his songs is called *I Gave up Drinking* and, during one of his stays, a person in the house tried to wake him up after a long binge and could not so, they called the doctor. The doctor gave him a shot to revive him, but he was long gone.

And then the main singer on the stage told us, “Well ever since that day people say to doctors around here, ‘Just don’t give me the kind of shot you gave Charlie!'”

He is still famous for the song *Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down Blues,* which the Twin County ramblers sang for us in a style that was closer to the 1920s than the 2020s, slowly, a bit disco-ordinated in a musical way, informal, but with lots of feeling. And after an hour of golden oldies they slowly left the stage.

Meanwhile, as this is a radio show, the announcer would cut in and out of the performances and the red light at the stage entrance would shine red when we were On Air and then it would turn off when the announcer was reading the weather or some such thing.

Charlie Poole was a phenomenon. During the 1920s when the recording companies discovered the music of white Appalachians, what they called Hillbilly Music sales of a 78 would sometimes reach into the thousands as poor families often saved up for a Victrola hand cranked record player which would have pride of place in these extended family farming homes.

Charlie Poole in his day sold more than a million records which today is still a remarkable event. During the 1920s it was the equivalent of going Platinum during the 1960s.

Musicologists say that Charlie was the first Country Music star and was a bridge between the old time mountain music consumed at houses, harvests, farmers markets and the like and that was soon to take the stage as radio brought us the Grand Ole Opry broadcasting from Nashville, soon followed by the very Merry Ground which I was listening to on that day about a week ago.

The next band to take the stage was a group of younger men in their forties and fifties, likewise all from NC called Autumn Ridge. They gave us an hour of blue grass, fast, slick, virtuosic, harmonized with a lot of blues influences and virtuosic instrumental breaks with solos of banjo, guitar, fiddle, and mandolin.

I later asked them if they had played together for decades as their blend was near perfect. One of them said, “Nope, we have only been a band for two years but, some of us have been friends since childhood.” That explains it, I thought.

Two things that you would not have seen or heard on the radio

broadcast were the fact that the performers asked if there were any veterans in the audience. One man got up and they “thanked him for his service.”

And then off and on during both sets there was a man, my age or older sitting down the aisle from me. He was dressed informally and was wearing a baseball cap that looked like it had a Maga Logo except this one said, “Jesus saved us all.”

When the spirit took him, he got up and did a series of Appalachian solo dances that were the visual counterpart of what we saw and heard on stage. And then it was over. Two hours too soon.

I walked out onto main street, pass the Christian Book store that also sold pastor’s vestments and coffee, pass Soupy’s restaurant and the Hillbilly and Moonshine ice cream parlors.

As I strolled down the road, I came across a small store called Mayberry’s Music Centre. There was a sign in the window that said, “Jam Session Today.” I carefully opened the door and there seated in front of me in a semi-circle was a group of players and one woman who played electric bass, a man playing guitar, a woman playing hammered dulcimer and a younger woman playing a battery operated saxophone like synthesizer that could play along any melody, sounding like an old fashioned one line church organ from the fifties.

Denise, the owner of the shop, (the bass player) invited me to sit down. After a song she asked, “Do you play?” I said that I both played and sang, and she offered me a beautiful Blue Ridge guitar which that shop is the exclusive dealer of.

Pictures of her late husband Mr. Easter and their gospel group The Easters were plastered on the wall beside portraits of the great Blue Grass star, the also late Bill Monroe. Beside that was a portrait of Donald Trump with one of the members of the Easter family. I quickly got the hang of the Blue Grass hymns they were singing and proved my mettle by stopping with them on the last note of each song in a way that only long-term players know how to do.

As the song circle came my way, I sang the old hymn *Sowin’ on the Mountain*, followed by Boone NC born Doc Watson of folk music fame, his ballad *The Tennessee Stud* and then for humor’s sake a hit song by the singer from Mississippi Travis Trit’s hit, song, *Country Club*.

I may have been pushing the envelope when I played the old blues piece, *Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out*. But I

did not sing Jesse Winchester's ballad *Yankee Lady* for there is a line in that says, "I was making love all night and playing guitar all day." There were crosses on the wall and much religious talk among the performers and so I did not want to offend, for here I was after the Merry Go Round jamming with the Easter Family.

One woman told a story of how her church prayed for money for a single mother to attend an out-of-town prayer session and the prayers triggered the generosity of a well to do member of the congregation who paid her way. There was another story about a lot of fifty ukuleles that were being auctioned locally. Another member of the congregation similarly inspired by communal prayer bought the lot. And volunteers now teach young children at church how to sing and play using those instruments.

As more people joined us, I handed over whatever Blue Ridge guitar I was playing to newcomers and got to sample four of them. They were all in different price ranges. They were all beautiful, well-crafted instruments. They played well, the strings sounded like church bells, and they are the kind of guitar a blue grass player should take with him to heaven.

Denise said goodbye and asked me oh so gently if I was interested in buying one of the guitars. I politely said that I could not afford to do so today, but that I have every intention of returning to Mount Airy and playing with them once again. I hinted that by then I may have saved up just enough money to buy one of their fine instruments.

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