

SPIRIT OF BEREA

There's not much
of the Spirit
of Berea Kentucky
left.

The Growth Zealots
chain sawing and grinding
the trees,
incorporating
and paving surrounding farm land,
recruiting
plastic greasy chain restaurants
and factories,
throwing up tenements
of hundreds of tiny boxes.
The College tradition
and folk artists
fading, fading, fading.

My Madison County families
drove the two lane
through Berea
on the way to the Lake.
A few of the pioneers liked "that man in Berea"
but most did not.
Not our kind of people over there:
coloreds and whites together,
mountain trash.
A few
ran with the Clays
emancipating and suffragetting,
but most did not,
just hard work
and long hours on hard pews
in the God Fearing Church.

Feeling
homeless in the City,
decided to go home
go away from the heavy noise of the early 70s.
The Woman
wanted the Folk Arts.
I wanted Quiet
and a library:

Berea
 where the Bluegrass of Madison County
 merges
 with the Foothills of the Cumberlands.
 I took her to the beauty and song of the rivers
 and the woods.
 I took her to the families:
 the town families and the country families,
 those on this side
 those on the other side of the tracks.
 I saw our Oddness in their eyes.
 We belonged in Berea.

In Springtime
 as Earth tilts Kentucky closer to Sun,
 the last of the icy northern air-hammers
 strike warm wet southern walls
 and spray the land
 with tightly spinning
 cyclones.
 All living things cower
 from the dark western horizon.
 We were small
 under the two storey plastered pillars
 holding a small porch roof
 of the Colonial Hotel.
 The Woman sat on a siderail
 holding the cat.
 I leaned against the dark bricks
 of the old converted hospital
 smoking Pall Mall.
 Ann and Darin
 art students unofficially sharing a room
 down the second-floor hall from us
 stood holding one another.
 Coffee shop waitress Brenda Gadd
 twisted her apron on the lobby steps.
 Earl squatted in front of the black screen window
 of Minerva Tribble's apartment.
 She looked out and up
 saying, "That's a devilsome sky."
 Electric flashes lit clouds rapidly rolling northeastward
 beyond the roof of City Hall.
 A rope angrily slapped the metal flagpole

across Chestnut Street.
 Earl spat tobacco juice
 into daffodils hugging the hotel porch,
 “Yeah, maybe the wind’ll relieve this old building
 of its miseries. Save Mr. Kincaid the trouble
 of settin’ his dozers against her.
 Wind blow ‘er away.
 Set his bank right in here.”
 “Masonic Lodge will never sell,” she replied,
 “Without them selling, he’ll have to put his bank
 somewhere’s else.”
 Earl scratched grey stubble
 frosting his weather-red face,
 “Money most times gets what money wants.”
 I looked beyond Earl
 at the brick building next door.
 Masonic Lodge up, Wayman’s Insurance and Realty down,
 narrow and long like the shotgun buildings
 on the slopes of Cincinnati.
 Maybe the storm
 will relieve Cincinnati of its miseries
 blow ‘er away.

In the wave of reaction in the South
 after John Brown’s Raid
 and Fee saying while out East
 we need more John Browns
 substantial citizens of Madison County
 blew John Gregg Fee and his people
 off the Berea Plateau
 out of the state
 to Cincinnati!
 Cassius Clay and his newspaper
 fled to Cincinnati.
 But after the War
 of Americans slaughtering Americans
 they came back
 back to the place Fee named Berea
 after the Gospel town (Acts 17:10)
 that sheltered Paul, Silas and Timothy.
 Shelter.

The wind reached its peak

as the dark clouds raced through the Bluegrass
 passing the plateau of Berea.
 “Mercy, mercy, mercy,” Miss Tribble closed her window.
 “I’d say that was pretty close,” said Brenda Gadd
 “Got to help close up shop.”
 Earl groaned to his feet, spat,
 and followed her through the lobby for a last cup of coffee.
 Ann reached into one of Darrin’s pockets,
 he jumped and laughed. They ran up the stairs.
 Hugging the cat
 the Woman wondered if anyone had been hurt.

Remembered still
 the Big One of ’74.
 Bashed its way through eleven states
 from Alabama to Canada.
 Killed seven in Madison County
 blowing out the lights of Richmond
 threshing its way up the western edge
 of Millcreek Valley in Cincinnati killing five.
 Disaster declared in five states.

You felt
 the Spirit of Berea plateau
 organic
 chthonic
 a folk dance of learning and creating,
 probably some non-Presbyterian demon rum licentiousness
 foreign to John Fee.
 Born 1816 in Bracken County
 down east of Cincinnati on the Ohio River
 John Gregg Fee
 grew on his father’s plantation
 among Black Bodies
 sweating produce,
 the most valuable white burley,
 from the rich soil.
 Black Bodies
 bought, bred and
 sold like horses.
 Drawn to them
 by their humanity and the imprisoned
 dignity of their labor
 he was scolded and warned

but was undeterred.
 Having a constant feeling
 of a force greater than himself, greater than all this,
 he undertook religious studies
 which moved him through Augusta College,
 Miami University of Ohio
 to Lane Theological Seminary
 Cincinnati.
 There his classmate friends touched his consciousness
 with the words:
 love God with all your heart
 and your neighbor as yourself.
 They did not have to suggest,
 he knew from his God
 all men and women
 Brother Sister Neighbor.
 He knew he was Abolitionist.
 Finishing his studies
 he preached and called communities
 along the Ohio,
 communities where black people welcome
 but slave-owners and sectarians not welcome.
 Marrying Matilda Hamilton
 of Bracken County
 together they followed
 the core principle of the First and Second Testaments
 and with their hearts and heads and hands
 practiced and taught
 the dignity of labor.

Cassius Marcellus Clay
 the emancipator
 read abolitionist Fee's pamphlets
 and offered him a homestead in the Glade
 a fertile collar around the north bottom of the plateau
 to remove with his preaching from the river
 to the interior.
 John Fee felt the call.
 Enduring continuous meeting house fires, threats and assaults
 first by mobs of ruffians
 then by men of property and standing
 he preached and gathered communities
 from Madison through Jackson and Rockcastle counties
 proclaiming his right to speak and assemble

asking for justice from legal authorities
 who gave none.
 One day
 chopping wood with Brother Candee
 they decided to build a school.
 He and his community bought land on the plateau
 for teaching the sciences,
 love in religion
 liberty and justice in government
 to white and black children, boys and girls.
 Some slave owners
 sent their children to the new school.

The plateau
 was an island standing
 against unfathomably variable
 currents of time.
 Streams of buffalo, crossing the Ohio,
 sought the sweet leaves of the cane
 and the licks of mineral salt
 laid by ancient seas.
 Tribal people flowed and ebbed
 with the strength of their gods and their arts.
 Europeans followed the channels cut
 by migrating animals and tribal people
 but the plateau remained
 a forest sanctuary.
 In the beginning, Reverend Fee and his people
 couldn't drive a wagon
 through the closely set pillars
 of the primaeval tabernacle.
 Even when modern engineers
 cut the main highway
 from the Great Lakes to the deep South,
 US25,
 through the center of Berea plateau
 the canopy closed in over it.
 A splash of automotive history
 washed through Berea
 but before new super-powered tractor trailers
 could pound the meditative air
 a super highway, I-75, drew them away
 around the western tip of the plateau.
 There on the tip

the old coal road, the L&N Railroad,
 had bored a little hole.
 You could stand in the shade
 over the short tunnel
 and watch the iron snakes of industrialism
 slither quickly beneath.

Walking along the old highway
 passed the center of the College campus
 in a certain light, a certain hour of day
 you could catch in the corner of your eye
 faces in every tree
 in flower beds
 in collections of stone
 rows of hedge.
 The walls of the older buildings
 waved with the hands
 of students in every brick.
 Since its early days
 the College has served mountains students
 with little money
 with a willingness to work hard.
 No tuition, but students must work.
 All departments are open to learning by doing.
 With your diploma you get a labor certificate.
 Dignity of labor.

On the periphery of the early 70s campus
 behind small signs
 stood the offices of numerous campaigns
 to improve the condition of mountain people:
 Mountain Maternal Health League
 Mountain Association for Community Economic Development
 Christian Appalachian Project, Save the Children,
 and on the highway side of "Historic Boone Tavern" square
 The Council of the Southern Mountains
 Bookstore.
 Organized in 1913, the Conference of Southern Mountain Workers
 a fraternity of missionaries, teachers, healthcare workers
 changed its name, opened an office in Berea,
 held conferences, published a magazine
 and softly criticized the ethic of industry,
 the rapacious exploitation of timber, coal, people
 from the perspective of Christian principles.

Without money from people with money
 you got no mission.
 After Michael Harrington's
 The Other America
 government money flowed into programs
 empowering people with very limited power:
 Community Action and Legal Aid, Head Start, job training.
 Down the missionary trail from New England
 to the Southern Mountains came young Appalachian Volunteers
 to live and work among the discovered people.
 Some young and "radical" people
 captured Council of the Southern Mountains
 and moved the office deep into Appalachia.
 But the Bookstore
 full of books about mountaineers, recordings of mountain music,
 pamphlets of mountain poetry and mountain issues:
 about strip mining, about saving Red River
 from the dam builders
 remained.
 Polyester golf shirt people
 in big cars
 stopped by asking for directions
 to "the poverty."

Around the corner, beyond the dulcimer shop, on Short Street:
 Little Mama's Pizza,
 run by Little Mama herself,
 Fast Eddie's Cardinal Gro and Deli
 and across from them
 The Firehouse
 an original fire station for College and town.
 Replaced by new facilities down the road,
 the old brick garage with huge swinging wood doors
 resurrected to coffee house
 by students and faculty,
 the disrupters
 versus compulsory chapel
 for open dormitories
 for student participation in College decision-making
 and for greater commitment to enrolling
 African American students.
 In front of a simple platform
 at small round tables people gathered
 for Folk Music and Blues

poetry, plays and puppet shows
 Charlie Chaplin movies,
 soup beans, cornbread and apple cider
 philosophy and cynical humor.
 They came from Richmond and beyond
 and off the highways
 to be with the Firehouse.
 Under night lights
 Short Street undulated with young people
 couples and groups
 spontaneous community
 a free peoples' joyous fellowship.

Walking toward Boone Tavern square
 at a maze of intersecting roads
 stood the oldest brick building in town
 large "Italianate" Ladies Hall.
 On an opposite corner Boone Tavern
 three levels in the "Colonial Revival" style
 with south and west facing "Ionic Columnate" porticos
 and across to the south
 somber Union Church in "Classical Revival"
 with Tuscan columns at the doorway.
 But opposed to all of these
 stood unpretentious low brick Alumni Memorial Building
 with a small benched green space in front
 constantly filled with students.
 Spacious Baird Lounge inside
 offered a glass southern wall
 to the ancient mountains
 across wide green playing fields
 the Brushy Fork of Silver Creek
 and the rising forest.
 Would John Gregg Fee
 like this building best of all?
 Probably not
 being more interested in Human Nature
 than Nature
 he'd be lookin' to plank the trees
 to build more meetin' houses.

Lincoln waited
 until soldiers provided
 a major victory

Antietam 1862,
 driving Lee back across the Potomac
 23,000 Americans dead,
 to proclaim Emancipation.
 He wanted to avoid the propaganda appearance
 of a faltering Union resolve.
 But he needed those colored soldiers and laborers.
 Truly in the north
 wage earners and immigrants
 were rebelling against all the dying.
 In the secessionist states
 slaves were proclaimed Free.
 A Militia Act followed
 allowing formation of the United States Colored Troops.
 In spring 1863 recruiters began signing Freedmen
 of the north and occupied areas into service.
 Enlisting in the Army
 they got some Human Rights.
 The Army opened training camps in each theater of the war.
 A major supply depot on the north-south road
 below Lexington
 at a great bend of the Kentucky River,
 Camp Nelson
 added the task of forming units of the USCT.
 Back in Berea after years of exile, while John and Matilda Fee
 worked to reclaim the grounds, the buildings and the school
 John Fee had a vision:
 he felt he had the knowledge and the heart
 to help slaves become citizens.
 After the horse trail to Danville
 he took to building community:
 he walked among the Freedmen
 churching and schooling
 enlisting officers in building better housing
 corresponding with aid organizations for money
 recruiting black and white teachers and preachers.
 requisitioning a large bell from Cincinnati
 to establish the order of time.
 But no one could help the slave masters.
 They were angry and afraid of what black soldiers would do
 to them.
 Agin' the law, bondsmen were running off to Camp Nelson
 followed by their families.
 Emancipation did not apply to Union state Kentucky.

The families presented a major problem
 for the captains, the majors and the colonels.
 John Fee became their advocate
 for housing, schooling, healthcare, food.
 Deep in winter 1864
 while John Fee was away to Berea
 infamous Commander Speed Smith Fry
 expelled hundreds of women and children
 into the freeze.
 Many died.
 Following the public outcry
 John Fee helped get authorization from Secretary of War
 for the camp to provide refuge for black families
 and others seeking it.
 Shelter.

For Kentucky
 the war ended and began in 1865.
 As the support and protection of the Army
 and Freedmen's Bureau
 shrank away with Federal lack of resolve
 mobs of arson, harassment and assault
 ever following John Fee
 grew into systematic terror.
 Black folk in the countryside
 and their white allies
 beaten, whipped, burned out, raped, murdered.
 Many fled and camped on the edge of cities
 with little support.
 A ballooning need overwhelmed benevolent associations.
 White minds dominated by a notion
 of the noble confederacy
 its defense of white supremacy
 twisted law into Black Codes
 degrading the Freedmenwomen
 into disposable day labor
 without practical citizenship.
 But Freedmenwomen
 many who had dug, humped, built,
 nursed, cooked, laundered, spied,
 and fought valiantly for the Union
 never gave up.
 They organized around churches and schools
 ever petitioning authority

for what was owed.

John and Matilda Fee's Berea
welcomed black families
some touched by John Fee at Camp Nelson
and black students
some mustered out soldiers.
The community sold them land on the plateau,
opened up opportunity to work
and improve skills and responsibility
as the College grew.

Early 70s Berea
did not look back to the dark days
of the Day Law 1904,
upheld by the Federal Supreme Court,
demanding separate schooling for blacks and whites
enforced until 1954.
The notion of the noble confederacy
ascended in Berea during those years.
Early 70s Berea
did not think much of John and Matilda Fee
a myth of Fee fanaticism
had ascended in Berea.
But enough of the origins remained
to attract a whole lot of creative and well-meaning people.
From the early 50s Berea showed up to support
the movement for Civil Rights for black folk.
People spoke out and showed up
to end the Vietnam War
to lift women out of second class citizenship,
showed up against nuclear weapons,
not only talked about defending the Environment
but systematically studied how Berea
could become more environmentally sustainable.
The College formed Women's Studies
and Peace and Justice Studies.
The Interfaith Taskforce for Peace
opened a shop to market fair trade goods
made by people all around the globe
who really needed some fair trade.
The Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen
held spring and fall celebrations of creativity
in the forest below the Pinnacles Mountain.

A good time was had by all.
 Them was sort of the good ole days,
 sort of.

A national notion of neo-liberal
 love of unlimited money and power
 ascended in Berea.
 The College
 sold off or gave away College services
 which connected working people
 to the mission:
 water and electric, the dairy herd and creamery,
 Candy Kitchen, laundry, the prep school, the hospital
 even The Berea Citizen newspaper.
 No longer required to live in Berea
 faculty moved out
 taking their children away from the schools.
 Big money bulldozed sacred woodland
 and threw up big buildings
 emblazoned with big donor names.
 Legal authorities
 permitted Walmart
 to drop a big box bomb
 blowing away numerous family businesses.
 The streets raced with commerce.
 Looks like we'll have to build a by-pass
 and raise the height of the reservoir dam!
 Students of the southern county school
 annually caravanned through town
 honking Dixie and flying the confederate battle flag
 on their way to fight the central county school.
 Some citizens formed a Festival in town
 "for everyone"
 with the display and selling of the confederate battle flag.
 Gender identity people
 petitioned the City
 to craft a Fairness Ordinance
 protecting equal rights in employment, housing,
 public accommodations,
 and for relief from public harassment.
 City Hall packed with preachers and their people
 demanding
 we don't need no Fairness Ordinance in Berea.

Seemed like
 not many people asking
 what does it mean to
 love god with all your heart
 and how the heck do you
 love your neighbor
 as yourself?

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