

## A Mark Left Roger Barbee

Uncle Foy was the youngest of the five children in my father's family. My memories of him, his wife Mildred, and their two young daughters are good ones even though events happened as they did. He was the uncle who had a friend make my brother and me a small wire rack to use over the campfires we built in our backyard. He had a large, sweet, long-haired dog named Rowdy, and Aunt Mildred was pregnant with their third child. Uncle Foy was not only the youngest in his family, but in my memory, he was the smallest, and seemed to always be working, either during his shift in the mill or at another uncle's service station. He also had had rheumatic fever as a child, and from that he suffered heart damage. In October of 1959, when I had just turned thirteen, he had me come to his house and help him do some yard work for a few days. I remember shoveling loads of good dirt from an old animal coop into a wheelbarrow, hauling it to his front yard, and depositing it in and around the driveway of his house. It was here that I learned about black snakes. Once, while entering the shed with shovel and wheelbarrow, I heard something in the rafters. Looking up I saw a good sized black snake and prepared the shovel for attack. Uncle Foy reached out to take the shovel while explaining the value of all black snakes and that they were harmless to us. Even the ever-present Rowdy seemed to have learned that lesson from Uncle Foy. It was one of many lessons I learned in those few days as we worked to make his yard look the best possible. Uncle Foy, one month short of thirty years old, was scheduled for an operation on his damaged heart at Duke Hospital, and he might not survive the operation. So, he wanted everything in pristine condition just in case he did not return home to continue in the maintaining of his yard and flower beds.

The other day, while working in the garden and yard, my memories of Uncle Foy and this time with him arrived unexpectedly. Since the sun was climbing higher in the sky, increasing the heat, I took a break under the walnut trees near my shop. For company I had our hound dog, two beagles, and Uncle Foy's memory. As Tim O'Brien observes in **The Things They Carried**, I was captured "in the spell of memory and imagination." Held there, I worked to better understand that time from the fall of 1959.

As I near my eighth decade walking this earth, I have come to be suspicious of memory—both yours and mine. I know from experience that my memory of events, whether far in the past or somewhat recent, may have been altered by my wishes, fears, or desires. However, I have come to generally rely on my memories as basically honest, but worthy of a thorough inspection. It also helps that I have five siblings who serve at times as fact checkers, or at least as sounding boards. Sitting in the cool shade of the walnut trees with three dogs, I felt comfortable with my memory of Uncle Foy, yet I could not figure why the memory of him appeared so quickly across these fifty odd years. Something, I was convinced, had triggered his memory to appear.

The author Rick Bragg writes in **All Over But the Shoutin'** that memory is "like a room full of razor blades." For him, writing his memoir of growing up in the hard, red clay of Northern Alabama with an alcoholic father and mother who struggled to feed her two sons, that description seems accurate. However, the memory I held as I sat in the cool shade, scratching dog heads, was one that puzzled, but it did not frighten or sadden. It was a sweet memory that had arrived, and I struggled to figure out why.

We all want to leave "our mark." It could be children, gifts to charities or churches, literature that will be read in years to come, a space on earth that we occupied, or any number of things. The point is that I doubt any of us want to be forgotten when we die but want to be remembered for

having been here and for doing some good. Even in death we want to be recognized as having lived on this earth. Whenever I mention Connor, a brother-in-law who died four years ago, his widow, my baby sister, thanks me for “remembering that he lived.” I have a team mate from high school, Jimmy, who is a self-employed carpenter. He learned the trade from his father. Once he told me how on a few occasions he has worked on houses that his father had built. He continued to explain how, all these years later, his father's work still stands. As a man in his sixties, Jimmy recognizes and admires the craft of his deceased father. That is, I believe, something we all share—we want to be recognized and if possible, admired for a talent. Now, that I better understood what had driven Uncle Foy, I let the memory of those few days of helping him flow in the shade of the walnut trees and my life.

One month shy of thirty, Uncle Foy was facing a dire circumstance. He was heading to Duke Hospital with a damaged heart that would likely not survive the operation. I like to think that he had made good financial decisions for his pregnant wife and two young daughters, but that as his time approached, he wanted to make certain that their house and yard looked as good as it could. So, he and I worked to that end. I understand and appreciate his feelings now as a man forty years older than Uncle Foy was when he died. Since moving to Red Hill full time eight years ago, I have worked to make our yard and garden as attractive as possible. In some odd way, this four acres is my mark, my footprint on this earth. Like Uncle Foy, I want anyone who sees Red Hill to appreciate its beauty and recognize the work that has gone into creating this space. I know that all things change, but in time to come, I hope someone will look at the peonies in front of the bay windows and appreciate their beauty, admire the blue spruce that was planted in the memory of Mike Phillips, or relax on a bench under the willow oak that began as an acorn from the willow oak that shades my mother's front yard and porch.

My last image of Uncle Foy is of Rowdy lying next to his casket which had been placed in the front room of his home. The presence of Rowdy being allowed in the house spoke of their relationship and how Aunt Mildred viewed it. Uncle Foy had returned, much like the young athlete in Housman's poem, *To An Athlete Dying Young*.

“Today, the road all runners come,  
Shoulder-high we bring you home,  
And set you at your threshold down,  
Townsmen of a stiller town.”

Sitting under the walnut trees with our dogs, I realized that Uncle Foy, like all of us, wanted to leave a mark that says, “Hey, I was here. Don't forget.”

### **WRITING GROUP**

We all have our story or stories, and many of them deserve to be shared. One way to do that is to join a writing group where you can share your story, your thoughts, your vision, or whatever, with other writers. Thus, Roger Barbee is facilitating such a group on Wednesday nights beginning September 8<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m. in the Conference Room. Your writing is to be shared as other members of the group will share with you. It is not an academic class, so no comments on grammar or spelling will be offered or accepted. It is just your chance to share with like-minded folks. And your chance to express yourself in a safe environment. For additional information, contact Roger at [rogerbarbee@gmail.com](mailto:rogerbarbee@gmail.com), or 703-499-5948.