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Two routes go from the south side of the Great Smoky National Park eastward to Asheville, North Carolina. One skirts the mountains and the other goes along the top of the Smokeys and is named the Blue Ridge Parkway. The latter draws tourists into the winding, high reaches of the mountains; locals, I feel sure, take the faster track in the lowlands.

In those first weeks of August I visited there, a hurricane in the Atlantic kicked off big rains, rains that fell heavier the higher the elevation. Unschooled in wet weather, I ran into such thick sheets of water on the Parkway that I felt like I was traveling at high tide on a surfboard instead of driving a rented Toyota. Thunder and lightning shook the earth. Around every bend, signs warned of rockslides without explaining where to avoid falling boulders on a narrow road on a sharp curve. Fog became so thick in the Toyota's cabin, the instrument lights blurred in the haze. I figured any minute the computer would flash up "hydraplane imminent." Docked Winnebegos blocked the parking spaces and one troop of motorcyclists stood huddled around their bikes, slick and black as harbor seals in their leather coats and safety helmets.

In perhaps two to three hours of extra time, I drove into Asheville to a bed and breakfast four blocks from the center of town. The annual Mountain Dance and Music Festival

took up all the parking space and most of the hotel rooms in the city. Crowds or no crowds, Asheville is a charming Southern city, just the right size to find your way around and skip the stress of the big places.

My room was in a ponderous stone mansion of carved staircases and formal parlors. Halls and bedrooms were decorated in memorabilia from the 1920s. Frilly flapper type dresses draped across the backs of chairs and dusty derby hats and knobbed walking sticks hung on the oak hat closet. I unpacked my gear in the hall to keep from mixing up my clothes with the decor. Some of those slacks and jackets I bought at the College Toggery in Austin after World War II would be hard to replace. I'd preferred a little less atmosphere; however, at least there were no chalk sculptures on the mantle of robust ladies wrapped in thin mesh, proclaiming: "I got boxed in Chicago," or, "I may be from Chi, but I sure ain't shy," as I had seen in a B and B in Chicago.

The festival started at 7 p.m. and went right on to midnight. Amateurs of professional level stomped out clog dances and yodeled mountain ballads and led little kids through jigs going back to settlement of the hills. Old ladies sang songs of lost love; men picked on banjos and played dulcimers of valley lore.

But a pretty, long-haired lady was the hit of the evening. She told of her grandfather, Old Bread Papa, buying the first battery radio in Black Mountain. She said, "Every

evening at five minutes to six, he set his wife Mary and his sister Roby down on the couch in the front room. He'd keep the volume down to 'save juice' is the way Bread Papa put it. He'd review the news as he listened from his chair, fiddling with the knobs now and then to change the reception, but never loud enough for the ladies to hear."

She went on in a mountain twang, authentic but not overdone, "Well, my daddy Jessie was, and is to this day, a fiddler. He got to laughing and thinking how ridiculous Bread Papa was sitting down in his cabin, forcing those two women to only hear his version of the news. So one evening at six o'clock, Jessie stationed himself where he could watch Bread Papa mess the dial. Every time Bread Papa raised the volume, Jessie hit his bow a little stronger on the string, ever prepared to shut down, or decrease the sound. Bread Papa sat stunned at the reception until above Jessie's fiddling, he heard something about Mexico."

She paused for effect and said, "He jumped from his chair and shouted: 'ROBY, GO FETCH JESSIE. THERE'S A MEXICAN ON THE AIR THAT CAN PLAY A FIDDLE JUST LIKE HE CAN, AND I WANT HIM TO HEAR IT!'"

No material thing on or off the ranch seems enough to offer for a chance of my maternal grandfather hearing about Bread Papa and the Mexican fiddler. Pampaw was of Kentucky blood. He loved leading us through the big floods on the Conchos and the picket lines of the War of Aggression. He had a battery radio, a Phlico, in the front room of his

ranch house. And you know what, he used to lecture us about saving the juice of the precious batteries.