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Where I'm From

Lee Walburn

Born 1937, LaGrange

2/1/2012

I had no idea I was poor. I probably should have suspected, but who really knew the difference growing up in a LaGrange, Georgia, cotton mill village where virtually everything but a decent wage was provided by Callaway Mills. The mill is my shepherd, I shall not want.

As cotton mills began to hum after the Civil War's devastation, grateful whites emerged from the mountains and Piedmont shacks and arranged their meager belongings in company houses. They burned company coal in their stoves and grates. They raised hogs and cows in company pastures. They learned to read and write in company-supported schools, baptized the repentant in company-subsidized churches. They heard promises of regular paydays, unless they had black skin. The only thing whiter than a cotton mill was the Ku Klux Klan.



Walburn, around age ten, behind his house on East Williams Street; photograph courtesy of Lee Walburn

I was born into a third generation of cotton mill workers at a time when only a small fraction of LaGrange's 25,000 residents wore white collars to work, most of them in stores clustered around a fountain and statue of General Marquis de Lafayette downtown. Until I was four, we lived in a mill house with my uncle Frank, who rented one for twenty-five cents per room a month. We shared four rooms with his children and our grandmother, who blathered about kinship to Stonewall Jackson.

My family shifted from pillar to post until I was nine. That year Daddy and Mama got jobs in Callaway Mills, and we moved to a house on East Williams Street. It had three rooms straight through with no hallway. Mama used to say you couldn't heat that house with a pipeline straight from hell. It had indoor plumbing, but we heated water on an oil stove and poured it into a galvanized tub to bathe. The house sat barely above the ground in the rear, but the front rested on tall brick supports; water from the tub ran under the comically tilted house and past the imaginary secret tunnels I dug in the red clay.

I was in the seventh grade before I was told I was poor. If I had not read it in the LaGrange Daily News, I might have gone away to college before even considering the possibility.

That year I saw a photo in the local newspaper of children boarding a bus. I was one of the kids. The caption read, "Underprivileged Children Visit Shrine Circus in Atlanta." I asked my teacher what that meant and she said, "Oh darling, that was just something they had to say to get free tickets." For years I didn't question her explanation.

Her name was Miss Brown, and she was one of many who perpetuated an illusion that I was blessed. In the Callaway Mills village of my day, I could play basketball, football, softball, or tennis and never have to pay a fee or buy a piece of equipment. I could swim in an Olympic-sized pool and never bring a towel from home. I could read as much as I wanted at the Callaway Library and never have to purchase a book.

The cotton mill village was indeed paternalistic, and while it perpetuated a historical sense of dependency among adults, it fostered an environment of safety and strong values among its children.



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If I were to re-create a chronology of those who orchestrated this loving charade, I would start with two brothers, Howard and Dexter Shuford. During school week, they lugged their green bags of equipment to our mill village schools for games at recess. They organized half-mile-long cake races, where I would have always finished last were it not for Jimmy Strickland, who was fat, and Dan Medlock, who had flat feet.

Howard and Dexter put together kazoo bands with washtub bass and hummers made from paper-covered pocket combs. Then, in summers at Callaway YMCA and the Callaway Pool, the brothers kept us in line with flinty stares and tight lips that would intimidate the biggest bully. On Sundays they taught us at the Southwest LaGrange Baptist Church. At age twelve I decided in Dexter's class to be baptized, although I understood more about what he stood for than I did about the New Testament.

At thirteen I became increasingly aware of Mary Florence Moore. She was born with the gift of laughter and a sense that all teenagers needed her tender mercies. Never married, she lived at the Teachers' Home across from the YMCA. She chaperoned the Callaway Teen Club and tolerated no hanky-panky at the Saturday night dances. She produced and directed the club's plays and musicals and always had a shoulder available for the lovelorn. She once did a great thing for me. I was serving as representative to a state convention of Teen Club officers, and one afternoon after I led a session, she took me aside. She hugged me and then she said, "You are a smart kid, but you talk like a hick. You need to pay attention to your grammar and you need to get your teeth fixed. Otherwise nobody is ever going to take you seriously." With how many hundreds of others must Mary Florence Moore have mixed laughter and straight talk and set in motion waves of self-understanding? It just wasn't unusual in that cotton mill village, where children spent such little time wondering who was rich and who was poor.

To my way of thinking, it proves you can't always believe what you read in a newspaper.

Lee Walburn was editor of Atlanta magazine from 1987 to 2002. He currently lives in Armuchee, Georgia, with his wife, Jackie.

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Darlene posted on 04/15/2012 07:34 PM

I too grew up in LaGrange [during the 1950's/1960's] and can relate to this article as I took part in many of the events sponsored by Callaway Mills including the band, tennis lessons, YMCA [Chief White was in charge at that time], etc. Spent my summers at the Callaway pool where I became a JR. Lifeguard and helped out behind the desk with the baskets. I also remember Dexter and Howard being an influence on my life as well. Had it not been for the Callaways, I would not have had these opportunities. I have since moved away but this article brought back many found memories of my childhood.

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ScottS_2653 posted on 04/17/2012 07:41 PM

I also grew up in LaGrange during the 1980s, when Callaway-funded racial segregation was still the norm (and I currently live in LaGrange). The "no blacks allowed" swimming pool, library and rec center lasted until 1993. Last year I wrote a book that explores the effects and origins of the widespread, corporate-sponsored racial segregation in LaGrange. My book also tells the story of the "secret history" of LaGrange: a 1935 Callaway Mills strike that resulted in martial law. Some citizens were sent to a military internment camp at Ft. McPherson (where German POWs were detained in WWI), and at least one man was killed by soldiers as the National Guard evicted his family from their mill-owned home. See more info at <http://www.LegacyLaGrange.com>. Also, if anyone reading this knows how to contact Lee Walburn, please ask him to send me an email. I'd like to send one of my books to him. Thank you! Oh, by the way, the book has earned me a nomination in the 2012 Georgia Author of the Year Awards. Keep your fingers crossed! :)

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Katie Shiver posted on 05/01/2012 11:34 AM

Howard Shuford is my grandfather, my late mother's father. This was an absolute treat to read, and I appreciate you taking the time to write it, Mr. Walburn!!

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Gary R.T. posted on 09/12/2012 06:12 PM

Lee. I lived up the alley from you. (we were POOR) ::: HUH. Who said ::: I. Had a BAT. and. BALL. (used) Rebuilt with. BLACK. TAPE. ---- Stay Well. My Friend. ::gtodd

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