

## Stay the Hell Out! An Encounter with Appalachian Hill People

(3 minute read)

In Spring 1991, my wife, Elizabeth, and I moved to Frostburg, Maryland, where I'd accepted a job at Frostburg State University. Frostburg sits on the eastern slope of Big Savage Mountain in the Appalachian Mountains. The mountains are beautiful, forested, and green. We looked out our back window on hill after rolling hill. One evening in early May, we took a drive about seven miles out of town to show the spring wildflowers to our eighteen-month old daughter Meghan. We wanted to introduce her to the beauty of nature, and wildflowers were in full bloom.

We didn't know it yet, but Appalachian hill folk still lived in pockets of this region. They live in scattered farmhouses or trailer homes outside towns, and they dislike and distrust outsiders, namely, anyone whose family had not lived there for generations. They covet their isolation. They carry guns. They interbreed (many have sunken cheekbones, hollow eyes, and long, thin faces). For two centuries the hill country had been theirs to wander, hunt, fish, and interbreed in. They tried to keep strangers out. But strangers came and brought civilization with them, building houses, buying and fencing off property, and incorporated settlements into towns. Encroaching, bit by bit, on the land of hill people, who did not want anyone near their property. Two miles west of Frostburg, on the west slope of Big Savage Mountain, someone had posted a large, hand-lettered sign, just off highway 40: "Private Property. Stay the Hell Out! Or Get Shot!" We did not stop there to view wildflowers.

We drove another five miles along a well-maintained, paved county road. We parked our car in a school bus turn-around that bordered an open field full of wildflowers and tall grasses, and got out. Elizabeth pointed out various native flowers to our daughter: black-eyed susans, bluets, Queen Anne's lace, aster, foxglove, jewelweed. After about five minutes, our outing was interrupted. Two teenage boys, around thirteen or fourteen, drove up to us on three-wheelers (an all-terrain vehicle that is essentially a motorcycle with two wide back wheels). When they reached us, they turned off their engines, and stared at us in silence.

"Hey, guys" I said, "what's up?"

"Nothin'," the older of the two said.

They remained motionless and silent, staring at us. My wife was pointing out flowers to Meghan. Twenty seconds passed. Thirty. I asked them if they needed anything.

"Nope," the talkative one replied.

Another fifteen or twenty seconds passed. Then they started their engines and drove off. Elizabeth and I looked at each other, raised questioning eyebrows that asked "what was that about?" then walked *into* the field along a dirt road. Bad idea. Minutes later, a man on a motorcycle sped across the field from the direction in which the two boys had gone, drove up to us, turned off his engine and—said nothing. He looked to be in his thirties, with a bushy,

unkempt beard. His clothes were smeared with engine grease and he looked as if he hadn't bathed in weeks. Our daughter Meghan spoke first.

"Bike! Bike!" she said, pointing to the motorcycle.

"This ain't nothin' but an ol' piece of junk," said Motorcycle Man

I realized we must be on someone's private property and they didn't like it. I was about to ask if that were the case and make due apology, when a Ford pickup charged across the field from another direction, its wheels churning dirt behind it. The driver pulled up beside us, turned off the engine, and got out, can of Budweiser in hand. *Whoa*, I thought, *we're definitely on someone's property. We need to get the hell out of here.* My wife looked at me, thinking the same thing.

As he got out of the truck, Pickup Man said to Motorcycle Man, "Hey, what's going on here?" Before Motorcycle Man could answer, and before we could apologize for being on their land, the Three-wheeler Boys came charging across the field, engines roaring, and—*carrying rifles across their handlebars*. They stopped twenty feet from where we stood, turned off their engines and—guns in hand—walked straight toward us. My heart sank to my ankles as scenes from the movie *Deliverance* sprang to mind. The time that had elapsed from when Motorcycle Man drove up, to when Three-wheeler Boys walked toward us was less than a minute. We didn't have time to ask questions, apologize, explain. We had barely sized up the situation.

Pickup Man addressed Three-wheeler Boys: "What the hell you doin' with them shotguns?"

"Huntin' squirrels," said the talkative one.

"Not with them goddamn shotguns you ain't!"

"Yeah, we are!" The boys walked past us and walked toward the woods at the edge of the field. Motorcycle Man and Pickup Man began arguing about the propriety of shooting squirrels with shotguns. As the argument progressed, I whisked Meghan into my arms and we quietly, and quickly, walked to our car. As we neared it, Pickup Man shouted, "How y'all doin'?" Anything we can help you with?"

"Nope," I said. "We just brought our daughter out here to see the wildflowers. Sorry to bother you."

"Awright," he said. "You have a good day."

We drove away, quickly, thankful we hadn't ended up buried in some remote hollow.