

MY FRIEND BILLY C. CLARK

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The great Kentucky writer Billy C. Clark died on March 15, 2009. He began his life in storybook fashion.

On December 29, 1928, Bertha Clark, who was pregnant with her seventh child, went to Huntington, West Virginia, to shop for second-hand clothes for her six children. While shopping, she experienced labor pains. Quickly gathering her purchases, she boarded a streetcar and headed home. One thought occupied her mind: she was determined that her child would not be born a “foreigner.”

The streetcar ride brought more pains. As Mrs. Clark gritted her teeth and searched for the Big Sandy, the driver noticed her. “Something wrong, lady?” he asked as he stopped the streetcar to let a passenger off.

“I’m going to have a baby,” she said.

“Hell’s afire, lady!” the driver yelled. “Not here in the streetcar! Hold it! Hold it!”

“How far till we cross the Big Sandy?” she asked in desperation.

“Not far,” the driver answered. “How far do you live from the end of the bridge?”

“Below the mouth of Catlettscreek,” she said.

He pushed the streetcar as fast as it would go. The rest of the passengers shouted and quarreled as the driver passed their stops, refusing to let them off. Now and then he looked over at Mrs. Clark, “Hold it, lady! Hold it just a little longer!”

When Billy Curtis Clark was born on Kentucky soil that day, he seemed to be just another child born into Appalachian poverty. Billy’s father, Mason, was a cobbler and mountain fiddler. His mother Bertha took in washing and “scrubbed until her hands bled,” but she often gave to needier families.

Billy left home when he was eleven years old, and for the next five years he lived on the third floor of the City Building in Catlettsburg while he worked his way through high school. “I cleaned the men’s and women’s jails,” he remembered, “wound the town clock, and

served as a volunteer fireman.” He also fished, trapped, picked berries to sell, and worked at odd jobs.

After high school, an almost three-year stint in the Army made Billy eligible for educational benefits under the GI Bill, and he enrolled at the University of Kentucky in the fall of 1952. For financial reasons, he left college without a degree in 1955 and proceeded to publish five books with New York publishers: *Song of the River* (1957), *The Trail of the Hunter’s Horn* (1957), *Riverboy* (1958), *Mooneyed Hound* (1959), and *A Long Row to Hoe* (1960).

In 1956, Billy was home and working for Ashland Oil when he met and married Ruth Bocoock, also a native of Catlettsburg. Billy’s second cousin Jesse Stuart and his wife Deane “stood up with them” when they married in July. In 1963, he returned to finish his coursework at UK, served as writer-in-residence, and published three more well-received books: *Goodbye Kate* (1964), *The Champion of Sourwood Mountain* (1966), and *Sourwood Tales* (1968). He graduated in 1967. Then he became a professor and writer-in-residence at Somerset Community College for eighteen years. There he founded *Kentucky Writing*, a magazine primarily for high school students. In 1985 Billy and Ruth moved to Farmville, Virginia, where he served as writer-in-residence at Longwood University and founded *Virginia Writing*. He left Longwood University in 2003 for Hampton-Sydney College.

Clark’s books had been out of print for almost two decades when he signed a letter of agreement in 1991 that gave the Jesse Stuart Foundation (JSF) the exclusive rights to republish and market his out-of-print books. The following year, the Stuart Foundation republished Clark’s autobiographical classic, *A Long Row To Hoe*. That fall, the city of Catlettsburg proclaimed September 5th “Billy C. Clark Day,” because the state of Kentucky named the bridge leading from Catlettsburg to Kenova, West Virginia, the “Billy C. Clark Bridge.” Billy also served as Grand Marshall of the Catlettsburg Labor Day Parade that year. A mural on the floodwall in Catlettsburg now depicts Billy C. Clark and his books.

The gradual reissue of Clark’s books created a renaissance of interest in his life and works that resulted in new publications: *To Leave My Heart At Catlettsburg* (JSF, 1999), *By Way of the Forked Stick*

(UT Press, 2000), *Creeping From Winter* (Persimmon Hill, 2002), and *Miss America Kissed Caleb* (UPK, 2003). His work defined the river culture of Appalachia.

Like most successful writers, Billy Clark published extensively in periodicals and participated in numerous writing workshops, literary festivals, and book fairs. He served on the founding Advisory and Contributing Editorial Board of *Appalachian Heritage*, and between 1973 and 2007, he published twelve poems and eight short stories in this magazine. He also taught at the famous Appalachian Writers Workshop at Hindman during its early years.

Billy was still professionally active in his last years. In 2007, Wind Publications published two new Billy Clark books: *To Find A Birdsong* and *To Catch an Autumn*. That same year, the Ashland Community and Technical College Theatre premiered “River Dreams,” Betty Peterson’s stage adaption of *A Long Row To Hoe*.

Now he belongs to the ages. In my mind’s eye, I see the old muskrat hunter in well-worn fishing garb talking with his heavenly Father: “Lord, I know you’ve been listening in on some of those stories that my Catlettsburg friends have been telling on me. Now here’s what really happened . . .” And the Lord smiles, wondering if eternity will be quite long enough for Billy Clark to complete his stories.

The Jesse Stuart Foundation plans to republish Billy’s first book this fall. *A Heap O’ Hills* is a collection of four stories written while he was a student at the University of Kentucky. Everyone who has made (or makes) a memorial gift to honor the nationally famous Catlettsburg chronicler will receive a gift copy of this little book when it appears this fall.

I was always proud to count Billy C. Clark as a friend—and proud of his accomplishments. He rose from poverty to become a nationally famous educator and author. Thanks to his mother’s courageous journey in 1928, the Commonwealth of Kentucky lists him as one of its finest writers.