

## **White Flash**

**by Raymond Abbott**

When I encounter what scholars, writers, and such have to say about Appalachia, I am reminded that I need to write something about that region, too, for many years ago I lived in Breathitt County in Eastern Kentucky. I was there for about a year in the late Sixties as part of something called the Teacher Corps. Teacher Corps was a federal program begun by President Lyndon Johnson that was designed to put young college grads, who had not planned to teach, in grade schools in poor areas. It was thought that this might enhance the quality of low-performing schools, as well as to beef up the teaching profession in several ways, including putting more men in such positions, the belief being that young children from low-income families might not have seen enough men in positions of responsibility. Or something to that effect.

My reluctance, if I can describe it as such, to write about this world may have had something to do with the fact I didn't particularly like living in Eastern Kentucky, nor did I like teaching children. The lack of enthusiasm for teaching may have been the stronger of the two factors. Of course, until I got there and began my teaching duties—something brand new for me—I didn't know I would feel the way I did.

I came to be in the Teacher Corps after a stint in VISTA, another War on Poverty program initiated by Lyndon Johnson. VISTA was Volunteers in Service to America, and my placement was on a Sioux Indian reservation in South Dakota. I remained in South Dakota a part of a second year after my one year service. I then worked for the tribe on a large housing program called Transitional Housing.

I came to the conclusion soon after I was hired that the program was doomed to fail, but I was wrong. While the housing effort was riddled with excesses and inefficiencies, and woefully over budget, it did get completed, although not on time. I was fairly naive in those years and didn't understand how things worked with federal projects. If you ran out of money, you merely asked for more. It was almost expected to happen that way, and it certainly was not uncommon. I functioned under the illusion that you were granted a certain amount of money, called a budget, and if you misjudged or misspent, well, that was it. You suffered, or at least the program did. You might even go out of business. Not so, of course. Nevertheless, I left the program before it was half completed, disillusioned with the mess I was witnessing. But also, I was tired of the reservation life. The isolation of rural living got to me, with the massive social problems, especially the drinking and later, drugs, and the violence, including a shocking number of auto wrecks. It was the same as I was to find waiting for me in Appalachia, although it took me some time to realize it.

I was about twenty-five years old, and as I noted already, it was the Sixties. For the young who might read this and couldn't possibly remember the Sixties, it was also a time of war, war in Southeast Asia, and a military draft. I had a draft deferment for my Indian work, but it disappeared suddenly when I quit the job in Indian housing. I was thereafter eligible to be drafted and sent to Vietnam, not a prospect I especially relished. But the military draft, the Selective Service, was another bureaucracy, slow like other bureaucracies, and so my draft status did not get changed immediately. Thus I applied to the Teacher Corps, perhaps in part for want of anything else to do. Also, I thought maybe I could convince my draft board in Massachusetts, where I am from, to grant me another deferment, this time to teach school in Appalachia. I wasn't successful in that effort, but I will come to that part in a moment.

I was accepted by the Teacher Corps and sent to Lexington, Kentucky for training. The program included the earning of a master's degree in elementary education at the University of Kentucky. Part of my time would be teaching in a disadvantaged area, and weekends were spent taking education classes at the Lexington campus. I knew I would be headed for a rural assignment, although others went to work in inner-city Louisville. I felt certain I was picked for the rural assignment because of my work among the Indians on the South Dakota reservation, which was about as rural as it gets.

In Breathitt County, the immediate challenge became finding affordable housing. Housing was tight in those years and not cheap. We were paid a small monthly stipend which would have to make do. Another Teacher Corps intern, Tony Peake, and I began our search for housing in Jackson. I am not sure which of us first connected up with Shade Combs. It might have been Tony. Anyway, Mr. Combs was an elderly man easily past eighty, vision-impaired and using a cane. He soon became our landlord, renting us a basement apartment in the house in which he lived.

The apartment had not been rented in many years. It was in town, just around the corner from Lee Junior College, and convenient all in all. I didn't have much to do with the college, such as it was, although I used its library a time or two. What I do recall, however, was that some of the prettiest girls I had ever seen seemed to go there, as if being beautiful were a requirement for admission.

Just down the street from the college was a small hamburger joint called the White Flash. As I remember, hamburgers were about fourteen cents apiece, and a cup of coffee a nickel, with a can of evaporated milk on the counter for creamer. Whenever I went in there (which was often), I noticed out front a knot of men whittling and spitting. They looked as though they had been chosen from central casting. At this point I might add that the accent was as strong a backwoods southern one as any I have ever heard. Which must have made my New England speech sound equally foreign to them.

Once I asked the man behind the counter at the White Flash how it came to be called that. His reply, while picking up a decorative western-style pistol that sat next to the cash register was, "If you don't pay, all you're gonna see is a white flash!" I don't remember if he smiled when he said that, but it was said so smoothly it made one think he had given the same reply many times before.

Having lived on an Indian reservation where housing was at best substandard, I thought I was ready for anything I might find in Eastern Kentucky. I was hardy. But adjusting to Mr. Combs' property was more than a little challenging.

The two bedrooms were sufficient, as was the kitchen and another small space, but the rat problem was downright alarming. Although I never saw a rat in the house,

there was a large pipe opening near the street and I noticed several large rats enter that pipe, and I figured the pipe led to the house. But however they got inside, the result was a constant scurrying sound inside the walls and ceiling, and additionally, the sound of frequent altercations among them, which was most disturbing when one tried to sleep. And they were particularly active at night, which did not readily lead to a good night's sleep.

Tony, my new roommate, slept in what we called the front bedroom near the kitchen; I was in the rear space. One night as Tony lay in bed, he was certain a rat had broken through the thin ceiling panel over his bed and was hanging above ready to drop on top of him. He had awakened suddenly to see this horror above him, and in an effort to challenge the intruder that he thought was hanging there he called out loudly and made a forceful gesture toward the rat, hoping to frighten it away. Well, the rat turned out to be the shadow of a light fixture above his bed.

"It could have been a rat," Tony liked to say later, recounting this story to friends when we described our living arrangements.

The heating accommodation was bizarre, as well. There were open-flame gas jets on the floors, and we both feared that the ventilation might not be sufficient and we might thus be asphyxiated. And if that didn't happen, there was always the chance the flame would go out as we slept and the gas continue to escape and build up and eventually turn the place into a bomb. But we had to have heat. It was very cold in Jackson that winter.

What with the noise of the rats scurrying about all night and the questionable heating system, you didn't find yourself sleeping especially well. At least I didn't. I have never slept well in my life, but in Jackson it became damn near impossible for me to get a good night's rest. Often I felt weary when I got up in the morning, hardly energized sufficiently for a day of teaching.

Tony and I were both assigned to the Marie Roberts Elementary School in Lost Creek, Kentucky, about ten miles away along the mountain parkway. Only Tony had a car, so I rode with him most days. Tony was from Elizabethtown, Kentucky, but after his time in the mountains he taught in Jefferson County (Louisville) for most of his career until he retired. Tony was good-looking, tall and dark-haired, a friendly young man with an easy smile. He was a bit younger than me, and a graduate of Bel-larmine College in Louisville. Like me, he was Roman Catholic, but unlike me, he was quite religious. I believe at one earlier point in his life he'd considered going to seminary, but that plan had faltered before I met him. These days he talked of getting married in the very near future.

Today, I live near Tony in the Highlands of Louisville. I see him fairly often. While he had a long and successful career as a teacher, he has not been blessed with good health since his retirement. I can't now recall if Tony spent the entire Teacher Corps term of two years in the mountains. I think he did not, and took an assignment in an urban setting his second year.

I had a girlfriend at this time named Amy. I met her in the Teacher Corps. She was a year or so older than me. Amy was talented, very musical among her other skills, and she spoke French with a level of fluency I admired. She was also good at art, which is very helpful in the elementary school setting. Amy was part of a team teaching program at the Lyndon Baines Johnson School in Jackson. The LBJ School was brand new and was designed to be innovative. The rooms were in large carpeted expanses without many interior walls. I believe President Johnson himself came to dedicate that school, but that was before I got there.

I had heard that the concept of an innovative school such as LBJ had come from Marie Roberts Turner, the superintendent of the Breathitt County Schools, and the namesake of my particular building. She was by this time the widow of the county judge. More powerful people—the Turners (Democrats, of course)—you would not expect to encounter in that part of the world. All the same, Marie Roberts Turner in her own right had progressive ideas. She believed among other things that the mountain children needed to get acquainted with people and ideas beyond the mountains. Exposure to the outside world made her see the Teacher Corps as an instrument to help counter the isolation of the region.

So persons such as myself and Amy and Tony and many others, nearly all from outside of Kentucky, represented for several years a small invasion of outsiders, some with new and creative ideas, and maybe even foreign-sounding speech as well. My Massachusetts accent was quickly identified as out of the region. I was often mistaken for being English. Even now, after thirty years in Louisville, I am sometimes asked if I might be from another country.

Periodically Marie Roberts Turner herself came to visit the school which bore her name. But she never came unannounced, so everything and everyone was made ready well beforehand. It reminds me of something that often happens in Ireland, where I have spent extended periods of time. If an American relative is scheduled to visit an Irish family, the host family thoroughly scrubs down the homestead in preparation, scrubs it to a shine. Same too if the stations of the cross are displayed in an Irish home. They are carefully scrubbed and polished.

So when Marie Roberts Turner came a-calling, the preparation was Herculean in scope. Nothing was to be out of place, no disorder permitted. It seemed to me that nobody said much to Mrs. Turner beyond a “Hello” unless she spoke to you first, and perhaps asked you a question. She never asked me any questions. She was in a word a terrifying figure, although she certainly did not look the part, nor so far as I know, act the part, either. She was short in stature and stout, a matronly-looking middle-aged woman. She dressed conservatively, not expensively, and was quietly friendly. She went from class to class, never staying long in one place.

I was in Golden Mullins’ fourth grade class. I was theoretically a co-teacher, part of a team, but in reality we interns were not much more than aides, although the regular teachers almost without exception allowed us to do as much as we wished to take on. It meant less for them to do, which was how they viewed it, no doubt.

As I saw it, the lowdown on the grades went something like this: First grade okay, but children still having trouble controlling bodily functions; Second grade better because children more in control and thus a little more teachable; Third and Fourth grades, maybe the best years of all from the point of view of the teachers. Fifth grade more difficult discipline-wise. Grade levels beyond the Fifth, well, forget it! Impossible to control much of the time.

My roommate Tony had a Fifth grade class assignment, and he suffered considerably. Discipline problems abounded, and as I said, it got no better in the upper grades, although I knew only one person at Marie Roberts from Teacher Corps who had been assigned to an upper-level grade.

Golden Mullins (her real name) was very welcoming of me in the class, which consisted of about thirty children, with several boys in the back who were somewhat older. What they learned would have to have been by osmosis, because they barely participated in classroom activities. One boy slept through much of the day. He was not disruptive, and neither were the others in the back rows. But the day Marie Roberts

Turner came everybody sat up straight in their seats looking alert, even the boys in the back, and nobody said "Boo" unless asked. The punishment for acting out when Mrs. Turner was in residence would have been too severe for any child to contemplate. Same went for the staff as well.

When the traveling music teacher came around, the behavior was just about as good as when Marie Roberts Turner was in house, but for a different reason. When she swept in, which was about once a month, she placed on Mrs. Mullins' desk a large paddle, one with holes in it, and every child in the room knew full well that she would use it if need be. By Fourth grade the kids probably didn't need to see the paddle, because they knew by then just who they were dealing with. I never saw any child provoke her and consequently be hauled out of the room for a paddling. The reason for the holes in the paddle is a puzzle, but perhaps it was to make the experience all the more memorable.

The music teacher was a short, stout woman in her fifties with graying wiry-looking hair, and glasses that hung from a cord upon her bosom. She spoke in a quiet, restrained voice that was never raised, yet she commanded all our attention perfectly.

The first thing she would do was take out a wooden holder that held five pieces of chalk to mark out the staff lines on the blackboard. She would then draw in the musical notes, the object being to teach children how to read music. I don't recall much actual singing in the classroom, but she did have with her a pitchpipe, so I suppose we did sing a few tunes. As I say, it was awfully quiet during the time she was there, which was about an hour.

I recall being told by Gary, another Teacher Corps intern in another Third grade class that the music teacher was in his room one day when a child had an epileptic seizure, and the teacher had the entire class pray over the boy, obviously believing that prayer would rid the child of the demon spirit that had come to possess him. And pray over him they did, Gary added with a laugh.

Golden Mullins was not a severe disciplinarian, but she managed to keep control pretty well. She spoke very slowly and carefully, and the children never pushed her too hard. She had been doing this job for many years, and was happy, or seemed so, to have me in the classroom, and often allowed me to take the children off task with things I might want to talk to them about. Because of my experience with the Indians, I spoke of them often and the way they lived on the reservation. I tried to keep it positive, and I certainly didn't emphasize the grimness of the place, or note the similarities I by now saw to life in Appalachia. I didn't talk about the poverty and the poor housing and the alcohol and drug abuse on the reservation. Though unlike Appalachia, there were no huge coal trucks traveling on narrow roads belching out black smoke. That was one difference.

I was never asked to teach the class on my own, although I remember once or twice while I was there Golden being out sick or away, and I was expected to cover for her, and I did. Fortunately for me, she didn't often miss school.

That spring brought the assassination of Martin Luther King, and we talked about the subject for a time. Who he was, what he was trying to do, and so on. I don't think the children had much sense of who King was, aside from what I told them and what they might have seen on TV or heard at home. I even had them write about King, to get a feeling for their sense of what had happened. I saved those compositions and still have them somewhere. Most of the pieces were respectful and expressed regret for what had happened. I guess I could say all of the essays were in that vein, although one or two of the boys might have used the term "nigger," but it occurred to me it was not used in a malicious way, just a part of the vocabulary of some.

I am not sure Golden approved of this exercise I led, but she never said a word. We got on quite well the entire time I worked with her. She was a nice lady.

Some of the boys in the class were tough, and at times we had discipline problems. I recall in particular one small boy surnamed Noble, a common name there. One day he was especially rough and fresh with me on the playground. Somehow, an incident started—I may have had to break up a fight between him and another boy. We exchanged some angry words and he came back with something surly that was hard to ignore. As I turned away, the crisis over, I said under my breath, more to myself than anyone else, “Little bastard!”

Well, the little tough guy heard it and the next day his uncle, or was it his grandfather, at any rate, an elderly blind man with a cane (not my landlord) was in the Principal’s office. I was summoned and had to explain myself to this relative, which I did, as best I could. I didn’t deny what I had said, but I played it all down and the matter was settled between us, more or less. Other teachers later told me the man was prone to complaining in this way, but he was also capable of violence if he did not hear what he wanted to hear. He could come right across a desk, I was told, with that stick he carried and attack the offending person. In this case, it would be me.

That didn’t happen, even though I was guilty as charged, but I got by, though my language was clearly inappropriate, and Mr. Noble, if that was his name, accepted my explanation, weak though it was. I moved on with my teaching career such as it was, but I think I decided that very day that teaching was not for me. Not for a lifetime. I would finish the school year, yes, but no more after that. I think the experience with the blind man and his cane pushed me hard in that direction, a direction I was heading for anyway.

I sometimes wonder how that Noble boy made out in life. I recall one day on the playground after a long weekend he was suddenly surrounded by a group of boys, and I, smelling trouble, went over to investigate. But it seemed he was proudly telling the other boys a story about his older brother. He smiled as he told it, as if grateful for all the attention, including mine too, I suppose. Now this was, of course, gun country. He was recounting how his brother got shot between the eyes that very weekend, killed dead by some *blackguard*. Aside from the shock of the gist of the story he was telling, I found it remarkable that such a term, *blackguard*, might still be used in this day and age. I had never heard that word spoken anywhere else, and here it was still being said in Breathitt County, Kentucky. And I heard it more than once. In my growing-up years in Massachusetts, an old expression would pop up every so often, too, reflecting the link to colonial times, I guessed.

I didn’t smile now, though, but I soberly took in what the boy was saying about his brother being killed. He seemed proud to tell it, and I sensed the other boys were envious, that they would have liked to have been able to come to school and report their older brother being shot dead between the eyes. I never heard another thing about the death, who did the shooting, what the circumstances were, or if justice was ever served. Was the perpetrator caught and jailed? Was it a revenge killing of some sort, an eye for an eye? I was reminded—not that I needed to be—of just how violent a place it was I lived in. My comparison with the violent Indian world came to mind again, especially when alcohol or drugs were mentioned, as they often were as factors in the resulting violence. Even the retribution, the payback, was reservation-style, and that was usually outside the law.

And if you could believe what some said, the violence involved race sometimes. I recall a couple of times hearing of a black person being hauled from a dam or a lake

under suspicious circumstances around Jackson someplace. I know we were often advised not to venture out into the countryside, not to go to strange hollows (“*hollers*,” they called them) without an invitation, the implication being that doing so could result in getting yourself shot. I took that advice. I never did go up any hollow, not a one, but then I don’t believe I was invited to such a place, either. Had I been invited, who knows, I probably would have gone, but I found that schoolteachers did not get such invitations often. Our role was pretty clearly defined, which was all right by me.

As I have been implying, I never felt I did justice to the teaching assignment I had been given in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky. Maybe it was because I seemed always to be wrestling with feelings of regret at having left the Indian world prematurely, or, if not that, wrestling with thoughts of my draft board back in Massachusetts.

For some reason my draft board continued to be slow in reclassifying me as 1A (draftable) and I had a birthday coming along in April of that year when I would turn twenty-six, seemingly an unimportant number, but not in those years. It was a very important number to me because draft boards did not (could not) draft a man who reached that age unless the pool of draftees was so low that they needed older men. That seldom happened. The under-26s were plentiful. There was one exception, however; if the draft board considered a person delinquent, then a delinquent person could be drafted up to the age of thirty-five. Well, wouldn’t you know, my draft board when they saw I was too old at twenty-six decided to classify me as delinquent. They even sent me a letter to this effect saying I was a delinquent registrant because of my attitude. This didn’t fly—not for long—but I was required to hire an attorney in Massachusetts to question such a punitive decision. Soon thereafter, the draft board sent me another letter saying I was not in fact delinquent. There the matter ended.

I did win, I suppose, but looking back on the events from a distance of decades later, I wonder if maybe I should have gone. I can see now that it was the very poor, often minorities, who got drafted and sent to Vietnam. Truth is, if you were smart enough to graduate from college, it wasn’t likely that you would become a foot soldier in the jungles of Vietnam, unless of course you wanted that role. And some did. Some wanted the battlefield experience. Not me. I was opposed to the war, Johnson’s War, as it was called. But I never demonstrated against it as many did, saying, “*Hey, hey, LBJ, How many kids did you kill today?*” And I never disparaged the character or looks of the man—his prominent ears, for example—as others did. Similarly, in the Bush years I didn’t make fun of that man either, his intellect (or lack thereof) or his humanity (or lack of it) and so much more.

And as far as President Johnson, things have gotten rather personal for me. Lately I have grown old enough to qualify for Medicare, a program he initiated back in the ’60s. He is solely responsible for its existence. I have come to realize what a godsend Medicare is since this past summer I had to have my appendix removed and Medicare stepped up and paid the bill of \$13,000 the hospital quickly sent to me. And when one is being brutally honest about LBJ, you want to recognize all he did for race relations and the increased dignity black persons rightfully have because of the accommodation laws. He has done more than any president since Abraham Lincoln for African-Americans, to my way of thinking. That is a great legacy to have. So when I think of LBJ, I try to remember him positively, remember the federal programs, including the War on Poverty which encompassed the Teacher Corps and VISTA, in which I participated.

And so I left the mountains after only one year and moved to Louisville, where I took my first social work job. And with some interruptions—some time away—I have

been a social worker ever since. Yet, in all this time I have never returned to Eastern Kentucky. I have said I was going to, one day—still, I haven't. Others I know have and have told how different Jackson is, how much larger, for one thing, and how in other ways the town has changed. But I have not gone back, not yet, nor, for that matter, have I returned recently to the Indian country, although I have written a great deal more about Indian life than any other subject I have tackled.

As I said when I began this piece, for good or for bad, this may represent all I will ever have to say about my stay in Breathitt County, Kentucky, still called by some, "Bloody Breathitt." But not by me.