

An Hour For Danny

by Robert K. Wallace

Scott Goebel had arranged a session in honor of Danny Miller at the annual meeting of the Appalachian Studies Association at Shawnee State University in Portsmouth, Ohio, on March 27, 2009. I decided to go, in honor of Danny of course, but also in anticipation of the Celebration of Danny's life we would be holding at Northern Kentucky University six months later in September. I had never been a part of the world of Appalachian Studies, apart from knowing Danny himself and attending several events he had brought to our campus, so this would be an opportunity to know his world in a new way. In preparation for the drive to Portsmouth, I took my 1997 Honda Accord in for its 96,000-mile maintenance service, which included a tire rotation.

I live in Bellevue, Kentucky, across from Cincinnati on the southern bank of the Ohio, immediately upstream from Newport and Covington. I am proud that Bellevue was the hometown of Harlan Hubbard, whose paintings I have seen from time to time in the office of the city clerk across the alley from my house when I go in to pay my annual property tax. I live on Ward Avenue, two long blocks above the river that was Harlan's lifeline before, during, and after he floated downstream to make his home at Payne Hollow. Today I would be following the same river in the opposite direction and, for the most part, on the opposing shore.

Never having been to Portsmouth, I decided to drive south from Bellevue on I-471, cross the Ohio River on the I-275 bridge, and follow Highway 52 all the way to Portsmouth on the Ohio side. I have never seen a MapQuest so simple for so long a trip. After taking the Kellogg Avenue exit immediately after the bridge, I was to continue 112 miles on Highway 52 until I reached the campus of Shawnee State itself. After the volatile weather we've had this winter and early spring, I was glad to hear from the televised weatherman in the morning that a mild, dry day was expected the whole length of my trip, with a high of sixty degrees and rain not arriving until sometime after nightfall.

I left home a little after eight in the morning so I would have plenty of time for an early lunch in Portsmouth before meeting Scott in advance of the session scheduled to begin at noon. This would also give me time to take a preliminary look at the Portsmouth Floodwall Murals painted by Robert Dafford (whose Covington Floodwall Murals I greatly admire). Having lived in northern Kentucky since 1972, I have always enjoyed any opportunity to drive Highway 52 down past New Richmond to Ripley, hugging the river all the way, crossing back into Kentucky either on the ferry at Augusta or the old suspension bridge at Maysville (at the foot of which is another set of Dafford floodwall murals).

The morning temperature was mild, all right, but the weatherman had not prepared me for the fog whose density kept changing between New Richmond and Ripley, brightening the headlights of oncoming cars. Taking a short break at Ripley, I drove

past the Parker House and followed Front Street to the Sweet Shop, where I always love to stop and see the river (and where today I planned to stop for dinner on the way back from Portsmouth). Last time I was here, on a warm glowing August afternoon with my aunt from California, we had sat, mesmerized, as a large barge rounded the bend from downstream and slowly passed us by. Today that bend of the river was filled with roiling fog that could have been poured from a smelter's bucket, had its color been burning orange rather than ghostly white.



Fog on the Ohio River by Robert K. Wallace

The fog finally softened and lightened as I drove farther east, entering new territory beyond the bridge to Maysville. During the early part of the drive I had been hearing Morning Edition on National Public Radio from WXXU in Cincinnati. Shortly before reaching Ripley I had been pleasantly surprised to hear that President Obama was about to make a formal presentation of his new policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. I was listening with close concentration to what he was saying until somewhere after Maysville, where the signal faded and I was unable to find the

speech anywhere else on the dial. This left me to focus more closely on the valley, the river, and the pockets of fog that still clung to some bends of the river, spreading a white scrim across the rising hills on either side. Approaching Mansfield I was impressed by blossoming white trees that continued all the way through to the other end of town. In the fields along the highway the most beautiful sight was the slightest smear of purple growing out of moist brown soil, looking more like the oil of an Impressionist canvas than something actually rooted in the ground.

There had been assorted road kill all the way. I don't know if it was because of the fog this morning, or because this road is not much traveled and the wildlife have become heedless, or because it is simply a daily occurrence. There was the occasional bird or squirrel, of course, and in one place I swerved for a lump the size of a raccoon in the middle of my lane. The most disturbing of all such sights was the large deer, freshly killed, but its visible coat somehow unbroken, just off the right shoulder of the road. There was some living wildlife, too, of course. Birds of various types would occasionally fly up from the road as my car approached. One squirrel parked squarely on the road scurried aside with plenty of time to spare. And once, on the right shoulder of the road, somewhere beyond Maysville, a beautiful cardinal alighted, a bright red gift on a foggy springtime morn.

I wanted to stop for the most intriguing sight I saw, a very tall smokestack reflected in the silver gray of the river, moving like a motion picture as my car descended a long incline, the grayish white smoke ascending high above it descending equally below it in the moving mirror of the river, its doubled cloud of smoke vying with the wide blanket of fog softly blotting the rising hills on either side in midmorning light that would soon burn away the natural fog but not the manufactured kind. I wanted to stop, yes, as soon as I sensed these fluid elements suddenly coming into play, but I was going sixty down that long incline and there was no safe place to pull off even though there was no car behind me, so I continued driving along, watching that high, high stack and its rising smoke glide low, low, and lower in the water until the descent of the road suddenly left it all behind.

I think it was somewhere after this that I first heard a sound from my right front

tire. The surface of the road had changed to a more pebbly texture and I thought at first that might be the reason for the light, recurrent sound, as if something was rolling over inside the tire. The sound was not loud, the ride was still smooth, so as I approached Portsmouth I was mainly concerned with finding the campus, locating the murals, and having a bite to eat in advance of meeting Scott before the session began. The campus was right there alongside Highway 52 as MapQuest had said. The murals were easy to find right along the river, but much more extensive than I had expected—block after block after block, documenting the history of this land from the time of the ancient Adena right up to the present day.

The woman in the visitor center across from the murals recommended a place around the corner on Second Street for a morning meal, so I was happy to slip into a booth. When I asked if they were still serving breakfast, the waitress said, “No, breakfast ended at 10:30,” it now being about 10:45. After thinking a bit about what to order from the lunch menu, I realized that she was now in a cell phone conversation that was not likely to end soon and that I would need to go somewhere else if I wanted to have a decent meal before meeting Scott. Looking for an inviting place to eat as I drove slowly east on Second Street, I could not help noticing that the sound from the right front tire was becoming more persistent. I decided that I had better get some advice about the car even if that meant I could not eat before the session or maybe even miss the session itself.

Fortunately, I saw a small used car lot a block to the north as I was still driving east on Second Street. I parked next to the lot and walked into the office, which was open but empty. Two guys were talking out on the lot and one of them appeared to be the owner. I said I had a problem and hoped he could give me some advice. When I described the sound I was hearing from my tire he thought it might be a ball bearing. The other guy asked if I heard it when I turned right or left, in which case it might be something else, and I said no. I asked them both, if it was a ball bearing, if they thought I could make it back home to the Cincinnati area. One guy said, “If it’s not too loud, you should be able to drive that far on it.” The other said, “Even if it’s loud, you can drive pretty far. I used to turn the radio all the way up in my truck so I wouldn’t hear that noise.”

This conversation was only somewhat reassuring, so I asked if there was anywhere in town I could have the car looked at. I was glad to hear there was a Honda service center only a few miles out of town, north on Highway 23. It was now after 11 o’clock, so I thought, if I can drive right out there and they can check it out, I might still have time to get back to the campus by the start of the session.

Those few miles took longer than I expected, with the stop lights. I was afraid I had gone too far and missed the Honda dealer, so I stopped at a BP convenience store and learned I had just a little farther to go. I was hoping they sold sandwiches there, realizing this might be my only chance for lunch, depending on what happened with the car up the road, but they did not, so I bought a bottle of water and a prepackaged cinnamon roll. The rest of the way to the Honda place the sound was much louder than I had heard it before.

The Honda service center had a nice drive-in express entrance with an automatic overhead door. Two men were there as I headed in but they were gone by the time I parked and got out of the car. I waited four or five minutes and then they came back. Chris was the service manager and today they were overbooked and understaffed. I explained the problem with the car and also my wish to get back down to the campus for the session at noon if at all possible. He did not know how long it would be before he could assign a mechanic to take a test drive and check things out. If he could not get someone before lunch time, then it would have to be after lunch in the mid-afternoon. If the tire needed ball bearings, he would have to order them and they would not be here until Monday. We decided that I should go in for the session scheduled at noon and then call him when it was over to see what he had found out.

Chris got on the phone and found someone who could give me a ride in about ten minutes. I telephoned my wife in northern Kentucky, leaving a message that there was

a problem with the car and I was not sure I would be home that night, saying I would call back later in the day. I had just enough time to eat my cinnamon roll and drink some water before the driver arrived to take me back into town. As we began to speak, I saw that Chris had already found a mechanic who was now driving my car out of the lot. As we were pulling out of the lot, the mechanic was already driving my car back in. Even though the time was now getting uncomfortably close to the session at noon, I thought it would be good to turn back into the service center and see what the mechanic had learned from the test drive. Chris welcomed me back and went into the shop to see.

When Chris came back he asked me to come in to hear from the mechanic himself, as the car was already up in the air. The first thing the mechanic told me is that all the lug nuts on the right wheel were loose—and that the wheel itself was loose, wobbly to the touch, as he showed me. The next thing is that part of the axle assembly for that wheel was broken, probably because of the wear from the loose lug nuts. The axle assembly on the other side was worn, but not nearly so bad. This information certainly explained the sound I had been hearing, which must have been caused by a failure to tighten the lug nuts by whoever rotated the tires back home. They could replace the axle assembly, they said, but that would be next week. They thought the axle would be safe for the return to Cincinnati but that I should get it replaced as soon as I was back home. So I did not need the ride to the campus after all. I could make it my own car.

Before leaving, I asked Chris what I could pay him for having checked out my car and he would accept nothing. He was just happy to have helped figure out what was wrong. I certainly appreciated the way he had juggled his schedule to be able to give me such a timely response.

By the time I found the parking lot across from the campus, the building with the registration desk, the building with the session in it, and the right floor and room number, there was Scott out in the hallway, welcoming me and another person who had made it just in time. The room had a broad entrance with a narrow dogleg to the left. Scott had planned this session as a Quaker-type meeting in which people would speak as the spirit moved them. I had somehow envisioned a capacious place in which the spirit would float throughout considerable space. Instead, two narrow rows of chairs a few feet apart held about fifteen people on each side for the length of the dogleg, each of us able to see everyone in the opposing row but only a few in our own. The spirit moved fine even in these confines.

Scott had invited five persons who had known Danny particularly well in Appalachian Studies to open out the session, after introductions, in whatever way they pleased. Danny had been my colleague for twenty-seven years, but Scott was the only person in this room I had known personally. Yet everyone here had known Danny as I had known him, though in different times and places, in different dimensions of his personal and professional life. They were all here because they had worked with him, were loved by him, and returned that love. Scott began by reading from a couple of the tributes in the booklet documenting the memorial service at Northern Kentucky University on November 15, 2008, one of which humorously conveyed Danny's inimitable ability to relate directly to anyone he met while crossing the campus, whether he had previously known them or not.

Two of the invited witnesses, Sharon Hatfield and Gurney Norman, were co-editors with Danny of *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*, published by Ohio University Press in Athens in 2005. Another, Gillian Berchowitz, had worked on that project as an editor for the Press. These and others who spoke testified to Danny's professional accomplishments, of course, but each prefaced those with more personal recollections, more than one recalling how Danny, upon their very first meeting, had immediately asked where they were from and who their people were, and had thereby declared they were distantly related. Each of these first meetings with Danny had clearly taken on a legendary, almost mythical, status—an effect deepened by each new person

who now shared a similar experience. Communal memories began to build on each other as well, especially those from the year in which this annual ASA conference had met near a particularly seedy motel. The stories about this motel and the transactions that took place there could have gone on all afternoon were they not brought back to Danny by the restraint he had shown when getting a ticket for making an illegal turn into the lot of that very motel. It seemed like everyone in the double line of chairs had been in that errant car with him, or wished they had been.

Sandy Ballard, as her witness to Danny, had compiled “a bibliography of his scholarship” which she passed out on a single-spaced double-sided sheet of yellow paper containing many items that few had known about, so modest was he about his achievements as an author and editor of books, articles, and journals. Among her list, which almost no one in the room knew about, in spite of how well they had known Danny, were no less than 19 books on genealogy and regional history dating from 1981 though 2002. How did he do it all? How did he recall it all, every last bit of it, it seemed, whenever he met someone new who might be related to some place or some person he had known or known about?

Gurney Norman began his remarks by recalling how, fairly early in his long acquaintance with Danny, he had said something about Danny’s work as a scholar to which Danny had taken offence, thinking Gurney was making fun of him. That’s how modest he was about his own accomplishments. At some point, however, Danny had written an essay about “Kin and Kindness” in Gurney’s *Kinfolks*. This essay, Gurney now told us, “opened up my own book to me.” Danny’s phrase “kin and kindness” had already been used by an earlier speaker and it remained the leitmotif for the rest of the session. Danny always wanted to know if someone *was* kin, but he treated everyone *as* kin even if they were not. His all-embracing kindness had brought us all to this oddly shaped room, in which one testimony after another bounced along that double row of chairs like a slow-motion pinball.

Several speakers mentioned having been at the memorial service in the Greaves Concert Hall at Northern Kentucky University back in November. Some had been moved by the variety of tributes—the spoken testimony, the poetry, the song, the dance, the classical music, the blue grass music. Others spoke of the emotion in hall that day, the intensity of the love and the loss, the diversity of the human family who were in the room. One person said, “If church was like *that*, I would belong to one.” More than one person, as we continued to talk, said, fighting back tears, “Danny was my best friend.” At just the right moment Jack Wright, from Ohio University, sang out, in his rich baritone, “We are going down the valley one by one.”

Since I had known Danny a long time, but not in the Appalachian Studies context, I spoke, when the time was right, of having been his colleague for twenty-seven years at Northern Kentucky University. He had come to us as a part-time teacher in 1981 and had immediately shown brilliance as a teacher and expertise in Appalachian culture. When he completed his Ph.D. we made sure he applied for a full-time job, and he immediately became a delightful colleague, extremely popular with students and increasingly well-known all across campus. His endless love and labor naturally elevated him, over the years, from assistant professor, to associate professor, to full professor. The turning point in his NKU career came when we had an opening for the departmental chair and Danny indicated that he wanted to apply. The only question anyone had was whether any one so warm, so kind, so entirely loving, could be a good chairperson. We addressed that issue by initiating a national search in which Danny competed and won.

Danny *did* show that a loving person could be an exceptional chair. He saw the best in everybody and he brought out the best. He loved our students above all else and made sure we all did everything we could to help them; he was teacher, advisor, mentor, friend, all rolled into one. Danny loved Appalachian literature, of course, as much as he did genealogy. Seemingly without taking any time away from our own department (he was

always at all of our own events as well as most of those, it seemed, around campus), he edited the *Journal of Kentucky Studies* for twenty years while also always being an inspiring, beloved figure at annual meetings of the Kentucky Philological Association and the Appalachian Studies Association as well as other groups many of us probably knew nothing about. In addition to this he remained extremely loyal to his relatives back in Ashe County, North Carolina (who, as we learned at the memorial service, had no idea of his accomplishments as a scholar, his stature as a department chair, or his endless circles of interlocking professional friends). We in the department heard most about his family when he returned from one of those twenty-hour-round-trip marathon weekend driving sessions in his car.

When Danny Miller died on November 9, 2008, he was in his tenth and last year as department chair. He had served two consecutive four-year terms as chair of our combined departments of Literature and Language and he could have easily have stepped down when they were completed—which would in fact have been in keeping with current university policy. But he had two pieces of unfinished business for which he requested, and received, a two-year extension. One was the creation of a Master’s Program in English. The other was the conversion of Literature and Language from a single department into separate ones. Each new initiative was successfully in place during the Fall 2009 semester when Danny suddenly died in November. A World Languages department was now established, with a new chair resulting from a national search. The M.A. in English was fully operational, with the maximum number of anticipated students enrolled. And our new English department had already elected Jon Cullick to succeed Danny when his extended term was to expire in June 2008. He left us in good hands.

Some months after the shock of Danny’s death, the emotion of the memorial service, and day-by-day and week-by-week effort to make our way without him, we had a shock of an entirely different kind. The special fund which sponsored our awards ceremony and most of our student enrichment events was empty. Apparently, it had been empty for years. Danny had been quietly supporting such activities out of his own pocket without letting any of us know.

As the noontime session ended in the Vern Riffe Arts Center at Shawnee State in Portsmouth, I was extremely grateful to Scott Goebel for enabling all of us to share our impressions of this rare and wonderful man. People lingered as long as they could, clinging to the spirit of the friend whose love had filled the entire room.

Several of Danny’s friends migrated from the session in memory of him to the one by Dick Hague, his longtime friend from the Cincinnati metropolitan area as well as the Appalachian Studies Association. Dick read sections of his long poem “Where Drunk Men Go” in alternation with songs selected, sung, and played, with guitar, by Michael Henson. Hague’s ostensible subject accorded well with the accounts of that legendary conference at the notorious motel about which we had heard during the previous session. His deeper subject, in its all-encompassing humanity and musical counterpoint, went straight to the heart of who Danny was and what he lived for. I wish Danny could have been here to hear the words and the music—which combined blue grass and spiritual with a touch of the blues. In September Dick Hague and his Ink Tank collaborators on Main Street in Cincinnati are going to throw a warm-up party the night before the daylong Celebration of Danny Miller and Appalachian writers. In the audience for the Portsmouth performance by Dick and Michael was Sherry Cook Stanforth, whose own Appalachian bands will be providing the music for the festive reception that will conclude the September 26 Celebration.

After enjoying the session that Dick and Michael filled with their words and music, and supplementing my meager lunch with some food from the conference reception table, I now had a full hour, which I fully needed, to walk the Robert Dafford murals block by block, reading the informative panels on the other side of the street as I went. This



Covington Flood Mural
taken by Robert K. Wallace

is public art of a high order, teaching me a multitude of things I had never known about this city I had never visited before and doing so in an artistically smart and engaging way. I photographed two images for friends. One depicts Tecumseh as a spirit high in the sky, urging his peoples on (for a current student who is writing a historical novel which pivots on Tecumseh). The other depicts the massive uranium processing plant not far from the city (for a photographer friend who learned about this plant when documenting the nuclear industry throughout the nation). Before seeing these murals I had not realized that Jim Thorpe, Branch Rickey, Roy Rogers, or Jesse Stuart had lived in Portsmouth. I was deeply moved by Dafford's depiction of the Portsmouth flood of 1937, partner to his mural of the same year's flood now on the flood wall in Covington. Equally moving was his depiction of a much earlier flood—the one that had wiped out Alexandria, the precursor of Portsmouth, too close to the river.

The morning weatherman had predicted dry weather well into the nighttime hours, but as I headed downriver toward Cincinnati at about five thirty in the afternoon I encountered rain as intermittent as the fog had been during parts of my morning drive. The car rode smoothly after the lug nuts had been tightened and I felt no ill effects from whatever was wrong down by the axle. The scenery going down river was more neutral and subdued than it had been in the morning—a far cry from the riverside sun and lengthening shadows I had projected for my drive home. Many of the homes, houses, and barns along highway 52 looked abandoned, as did a number of gasoline stations in what had once been a Bi-Lo chain. Driving home, like coming down, I was again struck by the only spot along the way where I had noticed any conspicuous new construction. Rising in the back yard of a family home was the skeletal frame of a two-storey building, the outline of its two-by-four peak looking like a hungry beak. I had remembered while hearing President Obama on the radio in the morning that in the fall he and Governor Strickland had conspicuously campaigned through this traditionally conservative area of southeast Ohio. If his economic incentives help turn our battered economy around, I hope they will help people in this part of the state as well as those in neighborhoods of Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati that traditionally give Democrats more support.

Because of my afternoon snack at the conference reception table, I only needed coffee and ice cream, not dinner, when I returned to the Sweet Shop in Ripley. The rest of the drive home was automotively uneventful. I had traveled a landscape of the kind that Danny knew and savored. I had been treated with kindness by the men at the car lot and by Chris at the Honda service center (who if not some kin to Danny is certainly a kin in kindness). What could have been a day of entire frustration became one of deep inspiration, as I heard from a whole new set people for whom Danny is still a touchstone in their lives.

Whatever happens with our present-day economy, we need to nurture the ability to live with, not off, the land—as had the Adena and other Native Americans who had inhabited the Portsmouth area, and the entire Ohio River flood plain, long before the white man came. We need to nurture the spirit of “kin and kindness” that Danny saw in Gurney, helped Gurney see more deeply in his own writing, and extended always to all who knew him. All in all, it was a very good day for an extraordinary man who will stay with all who knew him as long as we live.