



Jake Maynard

## SLAUGHTERING HOGS

### 1.

*Early in the morning of butchering day, the scalding water was readied. Some farms had a cast-iron bowl about four feet in diameter set into a stone furnace. . . . Other families simply had an oil drum tipped half over and filled half full of water.*

Don's farm could have been the cover shot of a photo series on Appalachian poverty, which is to say it resembled most farms I've seen. The cracker box house had been swarmed by ivy that worked its fingers inside the shiplap siding. In the yard, tractor attachments sat idle at the place of last use. The outbuildings were cockeyed or soon would be. And then there were the bones, and the other less obvious chicken parts, strewn in the mud. It was early spring, the season of mud and frost in West Virginia.

"It's a working farm," Don said, showing Annie and me the acreage. "This is what they look like." He was right, of course. Farming isn't pretty. Pretty farms are hobby farms.

A fifty-five-gallon barrel had been angled against some cinderblocks in the raw yard. Don had dug a hole in the dirt around the barrel, unlit kindling filling the hole. We were to use hot water to scald the hair from two hogs, which were still rooting and snuffling in the hogpen down the driveway.

Don was thin in a Carhartt jacket stippled with chicken shit, the same coat he wore to the boarding school where we worked together. It was a special school for troubled kids. Kids that came from trailer parks and farms and coal towns. Sometimes they were black kids from West Virginia's cities, or teen girls with twenty-five-year-old boyfriends. Some left babies somewhere. Many came from drug-addled homes, a staggering number from sexual abuse. There were several kids with no chance of graduating; my job was to prepare them for the high school equivalency exam. Most took several tries or turned eighteen and walked out, middle fingers held high.

Don supposedly taught history. But instead of teaching his students about Marco Polo, he took them outside to tap trees for syrup. Instead of



teaching them about the transcontinental railroad, he took them on tours of local farms and sawmills. Once, he brought some turkeys to the school, and his history class butchered them in the parking lot. He wanted to connect the students with local, practical ways of living. In essence, Don taught folkways.

It reminded me of *Foxfire*, a rural folkways project from Rabun Gap, Georgia, that I'd read a little about. In 1966, a young hip teacher named Eliot Wigginton moved to Rabun Gap to take a job teaching high school at the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School—a boarding school that was similar, in some ways, to ours. Struggling to engage his floundering English classes, Wigginton and his students began a class magazine dedicated to Appalachian traditions. They named it *Foxfire* for the bioluminescent mushrooms that glow pale blue or green in the eastern mountains, thriving in Georgia and West Virginia and up into the Pennsylvania hills, where my family originates. Their ghostly light has spawned many folktales.

To gather material, Wigginton sent his students into the countryside to interview old folks about mountain living. Compiled in *The Foxfire Book*, the chapter titled "Slaughtering Hogs" offered me a guide to traditional butchering methods in the days before the killing and cutting at Don's farm.

## 2.

*Meanwhile, the hog was killed (either by a sharp blow on the head with a rock or axe head, or by shooting it in the back of the head or between the eyes), and its jugular vein (on the left side of the throat about three inches back of the jawbone) pierced immediately. As one described it, "Stick'im right in the goozle'ere."*

A few weeks earlier, at the boarding school, I noticed Don crossing the parking lot with a white bucket swinging from each hand. Each bucket brimmed with discarded food from the cafeteria. In *The Foxfire Book*, Wigginton writes that "hogs were allowed to fatten themselves on the mast of the forest—acorns, chestnuts, and so on," but Don fed his hogs with the commodity leftovers of the state's troubled kids. Butchering day was approaching, and would I like to help?

My girlfriend, Annie, and I practically squealed at the opportunity.

I was fascinated with people like Don who kept the old ways alive. When Annie and I moved to West Virginia, we'd done so with the word



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“back” ringing in our ears like fiddle music. For her it was literally *back* to her home state. But for me it was a concept. It was *back* to traditional rural living, like Don had done when he moved to his grandparents’ old homestead, sans plumbing. *Back*, like Annie’s parents and their friends had done when they left cities to scrape a living from hillside farms. For that group of people—aptly called the back-to-the-land movement—*Foxfire* was gospel. Despite its homespun beginnings, by 1972 Eliot Wigginton and *Foxfire* agreed to anthologize their magazine with Doubleday. The series, called *The Foxfire Books*, would go on to sell ten million copies, one of the most successful books in Doubleday’s history. Along with the homesteading magazines like *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, *Foxfire* helped transform the 1960s flower children into the back-to-the-land homesteaders of the 1970s.

My copy of *The Foxfire Book* was originally given to my great-grandfather by my grandparents, shortly before he died. The inscription reads *To Dad. From Johnny and Carolyn. Xmas 1972*. It’s funny to me that my great-grandfather would be given this kind of gift. He’d lost the family homestead to foreclosure during the Great Depression and subsequently worked driving a horse-drawn sleigh, delivering milk, in the famously cold winter of 1935. He’d converted a house from an old chicken coop for his family and conscripted half the town of Cyclone, Pennsylvania, to help him roll it to a new patch of land. To him, the book was more nostalgic than inspirational. His son, my grandfather, wanted to ditch rural poverty so badly that, as a teenager, he left their tiny oil town to instead sleep on a cot in a hotel basement and shovel coal into the boiler every few hours.

The book would make its way to my dad’s bookshelf and eventually to mine. Such is the way tradition works. The contexts swirl, but some texts remain the same. *Foxfire* meant an entirely different thing to my grandfather than it did to my father or to me. For my grandfather, it was an origin, a place to leave. For me it was a destination. I was more akin to the hippie homesteaders than my own family.

In my grandparents’ stories and in *The Foxfire Books*, there’s a confounding balance of quaintness and brutality, which I was reminded of when Don loaded the .22. I asked him if the gunshots would scare the hogs. “I don’t let them watch Westerns,” he said, placing a food bowl at the edge of the pen to



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draw a hog close. Pop. The hog dropped and writhed stiff-legged, a bead of blood running from between its eyes. The other hogs freaked, shrieking and mauling the pen's railing with pure animal fear.

We flopped the hog—dead but still kicking—into the yard. Don thrust a kitchen knife into the hog's throat until the blood gushed, gurgling like old plumbing. It was loud, surprisingly loud as it drained. He told me of a local Mennonite boy that was partially blinded when a dying hog kicked a knife back into the boy's face. Stuck him straight in the eye, he said.

After the second hog was shot, I plunged the knife through its rubbery jugular. Annie didn't watch. But I'd wanted her to watch in order to show her that I was a competent, capable man. That I could do difficult and practical things.

It seemed important because I'd been far from capable at home. Yes, I'd split firewood and helped in the garden and cared for the dog. But when I wasn't working at the school, I worked with abused kids at a local shelter, and the two jobs had me all fucked up. Some days I'd drink beer on the drive home from work. Other days Annie would come home to find me lying in the bathtub with a whiskey. She'd sit on the bathroom floor and listen while I told her about the kids, their bruises or their memories of bruises. The cigarette and cat-piss smell of their clothes. I told her these stories as if I could diffuse their pain between the two of us, lessening it for them and for me.

Throughout our early 20s, in jest, I used to ask Annie to marry me, making rings from plant stems or bread ties. I stopped as soon as I thought she might actually say yes. We weren't talking much about having kids of our own, and I know that the silence wounded her. I didn't want children for many reasons but mostly because of a fear that I couldn't protect and care for them, a fear I couldn't reconcile.

### 3.

*The hog was dragged to the "scaldin' place" and dipped in hot water and rolled over to loosen the hair (by pulling or scraping), hauled out and scraped with a not-too-sharp knife, immersed again immediately, and the procedure repeated until most of the hair was off the hide. The hog was not left in the water too long at any one time or the hair would "set" rather than loosen.*



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Don said the water was right to scald hogs if you could pass your hand through it twice without pain, but not three times. On the third try, it burned.

We plunged the first hog and hot, bloody, shitty water roiled over the sides of the barrel and into my rubber boats. When the scraping commenced, the wiry hair sloughed off in clumps, revealing the white humanlike skin underneath. Each scrape exposed new parts of the hog's anatomy as the carcass steamed in the cold morning air.

With the second hog, though, the water had grown too hot. We scraped until the skin tore, but no hair would release. It's set now, Don explained. We'd have to skin the second hog whole. "Of course," I said. "No big deal." It'd been ten years since I'd skinned an animal, a deer a friend had shot. Although I grew up in the country, most of this work was foreign to me. My mother grew up like this, though, and remembered butchering hogs well when I told her about it days later. Then she recalled that as a child she once stole her father's caged turtles (used to make soup) and liberated them into their farm pond.

During my childhood, she grew mostly flowers.

"Culture begins at home," Eliot Wigginton wrote in the journal *Educational Leadership* in 1991. "My native-born high school students routinely do not know that they are Appalachian." Such was my experience. Because my grandfathers had died while I was young, and because my parents had abandoned many family folkways, I hadn't known it was inside of me. That old hillbilly stuff, way down to my marrow. It's a legacy I often felt robbed of. A legacy that Wigginton called a "peculiar, almost mystic resonance that comes—and resonates in one's soul like a guitar string—with an understanding of *family*—who I am and where I'm from and the fact that I'm a long continuum of hope and prayer and celebration of life that I must carry forward."

But can you carry a legacy forward without heirs? Is tradition wasted on the childless?

After I followed Annie to West Virginia, my mother was thrilled to learn that I was working with kids. She said, "You ought to just take one of those kids home with you someday. Like an older one that really needs somewhere to go."



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I didn't tell her what the job was doing to me. And I didn't tell her or Annie that it wasn't just the job that I had in mind when I thought about having kids. When I dodged and slipped their questions about settling down, I created for myself evidence to support my fears. Cold hard reasons not to raise a family. They included my older sister, an unparentable child who snuck out, stole the car, skipped counseling, got high, got drunk, got pregnant at sixteen by a local deadbeat of twenty-four.

And they included the boy that lived at the end of our road who drowned in a waist-deep creek. And all of my redneck classmates killed in car wrecks or by putting guns in their own mouths. (Boys will be boys will be boys.)

And they especially included the neighbor girl from my teen years, one grade below, whom I would take into the field in junior high so that we could rub our bodies together. How I told my friends and how she acquired a reputation. Many years later, her father would go to jail for molesting her and her stepsisters through the course of three marriages. When they'd moved in next door, he'd enthusiastically offered to help my sisters with their homework.

The miasma of shit that can happen. That does. Every day I saw it; every day I thought about it.

#### 4.

*Now the neck was cut around the base of the head and through the throat so that the backbone could be ringed completely. Then the head was twisted off and set aside. . . . Then the large intestine was cut free from the anus, the end pulled out and tied shut . . .*

You can hang most animals by their Achilles tendons. To hang our hogs we used a thick dowel with hooks at each end—called a gambrel or gamblin' stick or a singletree—attached via pulley to a cargo chain, which we looped around the ceiling joist and lifted, raising a denuded hog so that the middle of its belly rocked gently at eye-level. Teats.

With each hog, Don sliced down the belly, and gray guts poked through. Standing on a chair, he sawed around the asshole and under the tail, connecting the incisions, and then he tied off the rectum so as not to drip any shit onto the meat. Next, he finished the belly slit and excavated the gelatinous mess of organs, allowing them to drop with a slosh into a bucket





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on the floor. We tossed the guts to Don's chickens, which had escaped their coop and now circled the shack, numbering nearly one hundred and smelling the blood.

We lopped off the heads and placed them on the table. One had been mostly scraped, so it looked like it wore a goatee and mohawk. I took a picture and told Annie I planned to use it on my upcoming heavy metal album, but she didn't laugh because she'd already heard all of my jokes. Just like in *Foxfire*, we cut the cheeks from the hogs (jowl bacon) and gave the heads to the chickens.

As we carved and sorted the trimmings for sausage, Don told me he didn't think that the boarding school should exist at all and that it was essentially a prison in school's clothing. Don was a libertarian, a Thoreauvian self-reliance type who thought people could best find their way on their own. Teenagers included. In the nine months since I'd been working there, I started to think he was right. Forcing rigor upon the kids couldn't undo what had been done to them. Neither could teaching them folkways, of course, but Don hoped his lessons could at least inspire some self-efficacy. I thought it could, too, which is why I tried the same tactics with my kids at the shelter.

But now I see that the difference between Don's work and *Foxfire* was that *Foxfire* was consensus-based. Wigginton's students had wanted to start a folkways magazine. They wanted to go out into the country and collect stories from the old folks, seeing some intrinsic value in folklife. Or, at least, they trusted what Wigginton saw in it.

Annie and Don found lots to talk about that day: the legalization of raw milk, the sale of home-processed turkeys, mobile slaughterhouses, agricultural tax reform. To me, those were the boring specifics muffing up my homesteader ethos. But to them, the specifics ensured the lifestyle. Instead of listening—and learning—I often walked outside to watch the chickens peck the hog heads to the skull, and once when I returned to the shack, Don was trying to convince Annie to run for the West Virginia legislature. "We need someone with some common sense," he told her.

Because the bone saw was missing, we couldn't hack the ribs from the spine to create the chops. So Don and I drove a few miles down the road to borrow a battery-powered reciprocating saw. On the way back he said, "Annie's a sharp one. You oughtta hurry up and marry her."





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5.

*Take the carcass down and put it on its back on a table or counter. With an axe, chop all the way down both sides of the backbone, close to the backbone, and lift it out. The meat then falls into pieces. (This is the old way. Nowadays they saw the backbone right down the middle and get pork chops and fatback.)*

For Eliot Wigginton, accolades followed *The Foxfire Books*: a *Time Magazine* story in 1972; visits to the *Today Show* in following years; a Broadway play based on his work in 1982; a best-selling memoir in 1985; Georgia Teacher of the Year in 1986; MacArthur Genius Award in 1989. He became the most famous educator of his era.

When the book sold, Wigginton cleaved the whole project from the Rabun Gap School and purchased a tract of property contiguous with his personal fifty-acre spread. The newly founded Foxfire Organization called it “The Land,” and on The Land the organization grew. Foxfire became an economy unto itself, hiring alumni like Tommy Wilson, editor of the first issue of the magazine, as full-time employees. They moved from the abstract to the concrete, from collecting lore to collecting material culture. Tommy Wilson disassembled a historic water mill and reassembled it on the property. More reconstructed buildings followed, serving as classrooms, offices, a museum. Furthermore, the organization began a training program directed at teachers across the country. Its pedagogy reached more than 2,000 teachers as far away as Harlem, Puerto Rico, and the Alaskan tribal lands. It was an empire of the past, made by Wigginton and a bunch of teenagers.

Though I didn’t know much about Foxfire then, Annie and I had spent some time dreaming of it. More than once, sitting in the broom sedge on a hill above our house, we permitted ourselves daydreams of a folk school in which Annie would teach agriculture and music and I’d teach writing. We would have workshops on canning vegetables and playing banjo and writing poetry. We would buy an old storefront—in her hometown or mine, we could never agree—and provide space for local artisans. We’d offer jobs and apprenticeships to kids like the ones I worked with, the forgotten ones.

But the school and the shelter were sapping my faith in change, and my lack of fortitude was sapping Annie’s faith in me. And anyway, we never discussed why we wanted to go Back. Why the past, tradition, Foxfire? Why





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slaughter hogs?

I think that, for Annie, tradition meant community. It's how she grew up—square dances, harvest parties, group homeschooling with other back-to-the-land families. But it wasn't the past that she grew up in; it was a curated past more reminiscent of *The Foxfire Books* than rural reality as I knew it. Her well-educated parents, like their community of friends, chose to make a mountain life in the image that they wanted. Therefore, her folksy upbringing didn't involve ATV accidents and teenage pregnancies and economic collapse, like mine had. While I didn't realize it at the time, I resented the ease of her rural childhood, as if she were cherry picking from my heritage. As if she could just take the good and leave the rest. This might explain why I was so keen to tell her about the shelter kids each and every night.

And me? I was seeking a different connection. While I was learning banjo or refurbishing old axe-heads, I did so with the belief that folkways created for us some mystical link with the past and our ancestors. Maybe I was also seeking a connection with the self I could have been in an imagined past. I felt like folkways were a path to some old strength, the strength of men who wouldn't be wrecked by seeing abused kids or crippled by the fear of fatherhood. Rural traditions were attractive to the part of me that wanted to be a strong and steady man who'd hoist his kids on his shoulders each night. But that wasn't me. And I feared that Annie was beginning to see it.

So, naturally, when the saw's battery died before we could finish cleaving a hog's spine, I volunteered to split it with a double-bit Michigan axe. Just like in *Foxfire*. We sterilized and sharpened the blade, and I swung. Three whacks later, the hog became two half-hogs, rocking from their gamblin' hooks and slapping into each other as if trying to grow back together again.

### 6.

*Hogs were slaughtered, cut up, cured, and smoked at home. In fact, in many mountain homes today, slaughtering remains a family venture.*

Two years after slaughtering hogs, Annie and I left the land so that I could attend graduate school. With one month's notice, I cut ties with the shelter and school, leaving some of my students prepping for tests with no help. I



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promised to keep in touch, to write them letters of recommendation, but I didn't. Not even one. And a few years after that, Annie left me—deciding that I was not fit to be her husband—and around that time, I learned something new about Foxfire.

In May of 1993, Wigginton brought two ten-year-old boys to Rabun Gap for the weekend from a partner school in Georgia. They attended a Foxfire event, stayed at Wigginton's cabin, and returned. One of the boys told his parents that in the night Wigginton had removed his pants and fondled him. At first, Wigginton vehemently denied the allegations. But when the news broke, calls flooded the local sheriff, and soon the prosecutor had sixteen victims prepared to testify. To avoid a trial, Wigginton pleaded guilty to one count of child molestation. His sentence was one year in prison and a lifetime registration as a sex offender.

According to investigators, the number of actual victims could be as high as one hundred. The first recorded incident took place only months after he moved to Rabun Gap. His first victim was Tommy Wilson, who was molested twice by Wigginton as a teenager. But still Wilson returned to Foxfire. He says he went back once he was old enough to protect himself. Why? Because, he says, he believed in the organization's mission.

The news came as a shock to everyone, except the Rabun Gap locals and the extended Foxfire community, where Wigginton's tendencies were reportedly well known. According to Steve Walburn's 1993 *Atlanta Magazine* essay, "Sometimes a Shining Lie," the abuse was reported to trusted adults on several occasions. Once, in the early 1970s, Wigginton was confronted by four male students who threatened to break his legs if he didn't stop. Three of those boys would go on to work for the Foxfire Organization, keeping Wigginton in power.

On the heels of his imprisonment, *Phi Beta Kappa* published a wide-ranging interview with Wigginton. The introduction states that he "stunned the education community last fall when he agreed to plead guilty to a charge of child molestation." His crimes aren't mentioned again. In the interview, Wigginton says that the study of traditional regional culture offers students a vehicle to study ethics. "We can gradually construct, with our students, a yardstick of ethical behavior against which we can measure those aspects of culture we are studying—treasuring, showcasing, celebrating, amplifying those that pass the test and discarding the rest."





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He says it like it's easy.

But, in truth, it's so hard to know what is worth saving. A hog's cheek, an axe-head. A relationship, a dying skill, or the brilliant ideas of a horrible man. It's easy to think, like Wigginton does, that what we choose to keep is what our children will inherit. But what we ruin in the process—or what ruins us—will follow along, too. I think that's ultimately the difference between history and heritage. Heritage assumes that the past won't find us on its own. What I mean is that the story of Foxfire offers a more accurate glimpse of the past than the folkways it curated. The people hurt by Wigginton likely know this better than the rest of us.

I have to admit that I felt a sick validation in learning that Wigginton was a child molester. It was easier to end my love affair with *The Foxfire Book* when its editor was a fraud, its heart corrupted from the start. But more so, it felt like my reluctance to have children had been validated as well. I know that if I'd had a son in Rabun Gap, I would have innocuously handed him to Eliot Wigginton in a second. Because of tradition, because of that continuum of hope and prayer and celebration I'd been trying to find.

"Here," I might've told him. "Take my son to the old folks to learn what I never did. Take him to the creeks and to the cabins, and to that eerie blue past, growing and glowing faintly in the dark."

