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For the Love of Virginia

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History is important to me. I am curious to know, not just the names and vital statistics of my ancestors, but of their stories. I read a book once which made the statement "there are voices in your blood," and I am becoming convinced that it is true. As I read old letters, visit places where my family has lived, and consider the real people who emerge, I am enriched and encouraged. My sense of family identity and of rootedness – to places and to traditions – is cultivated and enlarged.

This essay is a way for me to celebrate and memorialize the lives of individuals who are significant to me. I suspect this project fits into the newer style of historical writing which examines and respects the experiences of individuals, finding as much worth in the private and personal as in the public records of global events. My project, therefore, is "just" a glimpse of the people in my family who have influenced me, and a brief commentary on their lives.

For the Love of Virginia

"Every man carries within him a world which is composed of all that he has seen and loved, and to which he consistently returns, even when he is traveling through, and seems to be living in, some different world." Chateaubriand 1803

Several years ago my son asked me to help him prepare a report on his ancestors and the countries (perhaps England, Scotland, France or Italy) in which they once lived. I started to explain to him about all the different nationalities in our family tree, but stopped short, realizing that it would be easier, and more meaningful, to have him tell about his Virginia ancestry. Both sides of my family trace to individuals who settled on the Virginia frontier well before the Revolutionary War. I realized I could tell David how my father's forebears emigrated to southwestern Virginia from New York, and my mother's from Philadelphia (arriving in the Virginia wilderness with Col. Patton in 1748.)

I chose to tell David all about my mother's ancestor, Mary Draper Ingles, and her remarkable story. She and her two children were captured by the Shawnee Indians in 1753 [1755] and taken to a village near present-day Cincinnati. Mary gave birth to a baby girl during the journey westward and won the respect of the Indians through her courage and intelligence. About six weeks later she escaped from the Indians, leaving her infant and her two boys behind, and walked back to Virginia through the forest, accompanied by a German woman (who had been captured in Pennsylvania). Starving and exhausted, Mary reached a neighbor's cabin about 20 miles from her home (Drapers Meadows – in present day Blacksburg).

She survived, was reunited with her husband, bore four more children and lived to be a great-grandmother. Her infant and her youngest son died in captivity. Her oldest son, Thomas, grew up among the Indians, but, at seventeen, was brought back,

perhaps against his will, to his family in Virginia, after his father had spent years bartering and negotiating for his return.

I grew up hearing all about these pioneer ancestors. Mary Draper Ingles' story survives, not only within the family, but through many books and plays written about her. A huge interstate highway bridge over the New River, near Radford, Virginia, bears her name. I have a picture of my great aunt Mary (another Mary Draper Ingles, born in 1879), at the age of 95, taking part in the ceremony for the grand opening of that bridge (1972). Family names bear witness to the popularity of the Ingles name. I have a brother named Thomas Ingles Apperson and a niece named Elizabeth Ingles Apperson. My mother's full maiden name was Katherine Ingles Hill. I understand that eighth graders in West Virginia are required to read a novel (historical fiction), based on her life, by James Alexander Thom, entitled Follow the River. I once took a boat ride with other tourists on Claytor Lake and was fascinated to hear the tour guide tell a version of Mary's story.

My identity has certainly been influenced by this family legacy. I remember hearing my mother tell us the story one evening as my brothers and I snuggled under a quilt before the fireplace. It stirred my imagination and pride to hear about Mary's ordeal and her struggle to survive. From our vantage point, in Erie, PA, Virginia seemed far away, and we were curious to see Ingles Ferry and the other places Mother described.

Virginia, to my mother, signified home and family. She was born in Richmond, in 1919, and spent most of her summers in Radford, her mother's home, visiting with cousins, aunts and uncles, in homes named Ingleside and Ingleheim. When Mother was a child, the Ingles clan was well represented throughout Montgomery and Pulaski Counties, all descendants of the Draper and Ingles families, from those branches that chose to stay in the region. Back in the eighteenth century, Mary's husband, William Ingles, had purchased land on both sides of the New River, and by 1762 started operating a ferry. Within a decade or so he obtained a license to operate an ordinary,

or tavern, for travelers along the Wilderness Road (a.k.a. Great Wagon Road). Mother's family history is interesting to us because it represents our personal heritage, but also because it covers so much American history. Ingles Ferry brought William and Mary into contact with thousands of settlers heading west and was crucial to transportation and commercial trade. Members of the family operated the ferry and tavern well into the nineteenth century.

I remember trying to milk a cow (with careful supervision and encouragement from Aunt Minnie), learning how to draw water from the well, watching in amusement (and some fear) while the cows came over to our car and tried to lick off the paint, and eating freshly churned blueberry ice cream. There was an old upright piano in the parlor which jangled and rattled out of tune. The parlor seemed stuffy and formal – not nearly as inviting as the sunny sitting room near the kitchen. The parlor belonged, somehow, to the memory of Aunt Shack, the sister who suffered for years from asthma and could never venture far out of doors.

Aunt Minnie was always in the garden tending to the plants and flowers. Her hands were gifted – for healing, massaging and soothing – and she was responsible for much of the physical beauty of the place. She could tell a story about every bush and tree in the garden, as it extended down toward the river. I remember how my father delighted in going on a walking tour with her on our visits, absorbing Minnie's serene enjoyment of the land and everything that grew upon it.

Aunt Mary was more the scholar and intellect. She had studied to be a teacher and earned a college degree, but gave up her teaching career to raise her brother's children. It has always seemed significant to me that Aunt Mary died (at 103, in 1981) on the same day my daughter was born. What conflicting emotions for my mother, to be thinking about the death and the birth, and simultaneous grief and joy!

My father was steeped in his Virginia heritage, too. He was the youngest of five children, born (1915) and raised in Richmond, Virginia. His mother, my Grandmother Dunc, had grown up in Lynchburg, and always maintained close ties to her kinfolk

there. Dad's father, "Daddy Hull," had grown up in Marion, in Southwestern Virginia. My father and his siblings attended schools scattered around the state – Fork Union Military Academy, Martha Washington College (Abingdon), Hampden Sydney College (Farmville), and V.P.I. (Blacksburg). For my father there was not one place or town that incorporated "homeness," but rather, the loose association of family homes and relationships scattered across the state. He loved to tell tales – about Ginter Park (climbing trees and delivering newspapers with his brothers), about catching a skunk at Camp Wallowatoola, and about summertime visits to Tazewell (Aunt Georgia), Staunton (Beverly Orchard), Blacksburg (Uncle Kent Apperson), Lynchburg and Amherst. I got the distinct impression that there were Apperson cousins in every town in Virginia.

After graduating from V.P.I. in 1940, my dad took a job with the General Electric Company and moved in with his uncle (also a G.E. engineer) in Schenectady, New York. Dad never did move back to Virginia (but lived, instead, in New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and North Carolina.) My mother left her Virginia home when she married my father, in 1942, and she, too, never moved back to her beloved state. During the years between 1942 and 1956, the transplanted Virginians tried to establish some attachment to the northern communities in which they lived, but they were both homesick for their relatives and friends. It must have been hard for a wartime bride to feel at home in Schenectady, with all its scientists, industries, and rationing, especially for someone accustomed to Richmond society.

Dad's bachelor uncle took a friendly interest in his nephew and wife and helped them to feel at home in the unfamiliar North. A transplanted Virginian himself, he had moved to Schenectady in 1900 and had worked his way up from a construction job, to a training program (on test), and eventually to a responsible managerial position at G.E. Uncle John, well connected and respected in Schenectady and at the plant, was approaching retirement age and had the freedom to devote some of his free time to his young kin.

Appy, as his friends called him, had developed a very special home away from home nearby – at beautiful Lake George. He had purchased a “camp” at the lake in 1920, consisting of several lots on the west shore of the lake, and had convinced some of his friends to become his neighbors. This camp, named Chilhowee after the village in Southwest Virginia where Uncle John was born, became famed for its Southern hospitality, as he welcomed friends and family from all over the world. The camp provided a home base for his real career – as a conservationist dedicated to protecting the wilderness (Forest Preserve) of New York State, and, in particular, Lake George and its islands.

My father had been to Lake George many times. As a boy he came up in the winter and learned how to skate and ski, and to try the unusual sport of skate sailing. In the summers he had a chance to swim, explore the mountains, and ride around in the extraordinary wooden inboard boat, a 1927 Chris Craft. Dad must have considered Lake George a boy's paradise, and he eagerly absorbed all the education available there - in hiking, camping, canoeing, survival skills, lumbering, and even ecology (though the term was not yet in common use.)

As teenagers, Dad and his older brother Jim spent many summers at the lake helping their uncle repair docks, riprap shores (a technique of protecting shores from erosion by constructing rock walls at the water's edge), and generally absorbing the latest news about their uncle's conservation battles. John and Jim listened to their uncle's stories about growing up in Smyth County, Virginia, while they practiced their skills – cooking on a wood stove, constructing skate sails and sleeping bags, or reading maps and planning extended hikes into the mountains.

Uncle John had transferred his love of Virginia into a passion for preserving all that was good in his new home state. Having loved the mountains and undeveloped expanses near his childhood home, he recognized, immediately on his arrival there in 1900, the inestimable value of the Adirondack mountains, lakes and streams. His devotion and his passion for Lake George were rooted in his love of Virginia, and in the

lessons instilled in him from his parents and relatives back home. He was effective as a conservationist because of his knowledge (his engineer's attention to details and accuracy), his integrity (establishing a reputation for honesty and unselfishness), and his enthusiasm and capacity to persuade others to help. He passed along his techniques and his passion to a devoted group of associates who have maintained his legacy throughout the four decades since his death, in 1963.

For me, Lake George represents a triumph of the human spirit, yet, at the same time, great heartache and disappointment. The successes of my great uncle are overshadowed, for me, by the realization that both my father and my uncle Jim could never quite figure out how to keep their uncle's dreams alive and preserve his legacy. I feel compelled to write about the conservation efforts at Lake George to contribute, in some small way, to the cause.

I understand how love of family and of home motivated certain people to do loving things. My Uncle Jim drove (from Marblehead, Massachusetts to Schenectady) nearly every weekend for about eighteen months, to help our family cope with my mother's illness (Tuberculosis) and absence. Great Uncle John risked losing his job at G.E. when he took up a political fight against powerful foes, all in order to prevent a power company from damaging the islands of Lake George. Mary Ingles chose to leave three children, including a newborn baby, and venture through the uncharted wilderness to return home to her husband.

Here, as I sit at my computer, I am surrounded with images and reminders – of home and family. The eight foot table to my left was once the centerpiece of life and hospitality in Appy's main camp. After holding a barn sale in 1994 and being tempted to keep as many important relics from Lake George as possible, I had to admit that the rustic benches were much too heavy to transport back South. However, I insisted that my brothers help me tie the heavy old table on top of my car. Somehow it managed to survive the journey, and I use it now for meals, for writing, and for woodcarving and other crafts. Prominently displayed nearby is a quilt I made, with the figure of a

raccoon and the outline of Lake George, obvious reminders of Appy, Dad, and Uncle Jim (who loved to feed and befriend several raccoons on their nocturnal visits to the camp.) A beautifully framed old photograph is also nearby, of the New River and the tavern at Ingles Ferry, taken at least one hundred years ago.

I understand why I value so much these artifacts and images. They help this transplanted New Yorker and Virginian feel at home here in North Carolina. Despite the wrenching changes and transitions in life, I am conscious of my identity, my heritage, and my roots. If I can instill a portion of this wisdom in my children, I will have been largely successful as a mother. If I can pass along this wisdom to a wider audience, I will have been largely successful as a steward and a writer. That challenge motivates me to get out of bed each morning.