

The Artist's Almanac

January 2012

*An optimist stays up until midnight to see the new year in.
A pessimist stays up to make sure the old one leaves.*

Bill Vaughn

The old year glides quietly into the new. We celebrate with artist David Wright and his wife, Jane, with champagne, shrimp, tortilla chips, and with hopes for a better year. We parted at 10, an hour past our normal bedtime.

So far it is the mildest winter in my memory. My favorite food, turnip greens, has enjoyed a vintage season for ripening in the garden – sunny days, just the right amount of rain and light frost, until they have grown to unprecedented size and succulence. The ones found in the grocery's produce departments must have been grown in Florida or somewhere south of the frost line, and they are tasteless. The best are found in local fields and vacant lots where every prudent husbandman plows a patch and sows a few seed in late August. To those who do not like them, they are harsh and bitter. To we who do, their pungent flavor, unlike any other, gives one strength to get up and do what needs to be done. They are savored like a fine wine. Middle Tennessee's soil and weather grows the finest vintage, just as it does in tomatoes.

Since I gave up gardening, I am a beggar, mooching them from friend's gardens or bribing them to bring me greens. We cook up a mess and ration them out in small servings each night, so as always to have a cathartic supply of this nutrient- rich vegetable in season. Imagine my delight on hearing of a still verdant patch north of town on the farm of old friends, the Reese brothers.

Reese Brothers is the world's largest supplier of mules, furnishing the National Park Service visitors with sure footed rides down into Grand Canyon. The rhythm of Ferde Grofe's *Grand Canyon Suite* is based on the steady clip-clop of their hoof beats. The CIA once tasked these reliable beasts of burden with carrying stinger missiles into Afghanistan to win the war with the Russians. This unique business merited a front-page story in the Wall Street Journal several years ago. The man whom Robert E. Lee named as the Confederacy's best general, Nathan Bedford Forrest, mounted his feared cavalry on mules.

But Mule Day in Columbia, once an excused school holiday, has declined, as has agricultural use of horses and mules (except among the Amish and Mennonites). So the Reese's have taken on an alternative Tennessee farm product: country hams, sausage and fresh pork. The valley of Bledsoe Creek,

as my readers know, is where all my fresh springs of inspiration lie and I went there this week to Sideview, then up along Dry Fork Creek to visit with



Sideview – Bill Puryear

Rufus and Dickey Reese. The place is marked by a large cutout red mule mounted on poles opposite its entrance at 593 Rock Bridge Road. The home is backed by a spectacular view of the hills and fronts a view of the valley opening to the south. There in the side yard is the smokehouse and the processing room. Rufus, his wife Vivian, Dickey, and a flock of peafowls greeted wife and myself.

We bought fresh sausage, chops, slab bacon and heard several long and hilarious stories of strange coincidences relating to the colorful past of the place. An Arizona rancher who came to buy mules and a wagon for stretching line fences around his spread found his great grandfather's name carved in the ancient cross beam of the Reese barn; he knew only that his family had emigrated west from "somewhere in Tennessee". Another came looking for the gravestone of a long-lost ancestor and found it in the drawer of an old sugar chest in an abandoned tenant house across the creek where the smooth marble slab had been used as a biscuit board, inscribed on the back with his ancestor's name. Such stories last long in oral tradition and are to be savored in the telling, not hurried, like cured country ham.



Curing shed, with two-year hams to the front and century-old salt trough hewn from a single large log.

Then I spotted what I had come for – a big patch of turnip greens with mustard and kale. Rufus, Vivian and the hired man picked two large bags for me and January looks like a good month's prospect today.



The peacocks, Dickey says, strut and admire their reflections in the windowpanes of the house, much as we steal sidelong glances at ourselves passing shop windows in the mall. They make excellent sentries around remote farmhouses, but their raucous cries unsuit them for neighborhoods. The Southern author, Flannery O'Connor, kept peafowls around her place, for their beauty as well as a constant reminder of the vanity of humanity that she satirized in her books.

The beauty and aura of Bledsoe Creek has long held a fascination for me I could never fully explain. I played in it as a child, and have hunted along it, fished it, painted it, and written of its rich history. Still, there remains an ineffable attraction to it beyond all this. Only when I began the historic and archeological exploration around it six years ago did I discover my folks, the Halls and Morgans, were its first settlers and builders of the earliest station forts in its valley. Its tributary, Dry Fork, is something of a geologic anomaly. Sparkling and free flowing in the winter, it goes completely dry in its lower reaches in heat of summer. A local theory is that it goes underground two miles upstream and reappears to replenish the Mill Pond of Bledsoe 2 miles away. This consistent with the semi-karst geology of the region, where Sinking Creek, which heads at a spring at the Donnelly Plant, goes underground before entering the Cumberland River above the Gallatin Steam Plant.



Autumn Water – Bledsoe at the mouth of Dry Fork, Bill Puryear

This cutting of the greens at the full may well be the last before heavy frost withers them. But there is a second coming, during the late winter thaw when the root throws up tender purple and mahogany colored leaves that hug the ground to conserve heat until spring arrives and they throw up seed stalks to perpetuate themselves. These are the crème de la crème of all greens, rewarding with their tenderness and flavor those determined enough to kneel and cleave each leaf from its root. They are the ones I'll be back for.

May 2012 bring us all a reemergence of health, wealth, and happiness.