

## The Origins of Katywil, Part I: Five Kids, 40 Cows, & 88 acres

My Dad, known as Slim Cole, grew up on a dairy farm in Purcellville, Virginia, which had remained a town of 800 since the 1920 census. His parents, Kate and Will, for whom Katywil is named, had married in 1900 and had purchased our farm, Shadowlawn, in 1917. He met my mother, Maxine, when he was buying fighting cocks on a trip to Manhattan. She wasn't selling them; she did fashion illustration for a department store there, and her roommate was the friend of a cousin of Dad's.

That was 1941. They didn't marry for another five years. Meanwhile, Mom joined the Red Cross as a nurse's assistant and was shipped to the Philippines, where she took care of GIs from the Pacific Theater before the servicemen headed home to San Francisco. When she returned to the States, she met my father at the farm and knew that that's where her "life was to be." Their two-week honeymoon to New Orleans was the longest my Dad was ever away from home.

Our farmhouse, an 1870's clapboard, hot in summer and cold in winter, faced south and had porches on all four sides. The eastern porch, actually an English basement, led into the old winter kitchen, later a workshop. After witnessing a very dramatic barn fire at a neighbor's farm, complete with the screaming of animals caught in the blaze, I became something of a pyrophobe. After that, our house felt like a tinderbox when it creaked and shuddered in the wind.

Like most of my friends in 4-H, I baled hay, stomped silage, washed udders, and carried milk to the dairy. Speaking of udders, in 1964 I was fourth in the state in the udder-judging contest. When I was in eighth grade, Dad bought twenty more cows, realizing that he might have his five kids to put through college. That winter, Purcellville got more than five feet of snow. Since we didn't have room in the loafing shed for all the new cows, they had to stay outside, and several died. When the thaw came, we dragged them with a tractor to the woods.

That was the winter I decided to go to college. Snow kept drifting up our driveway so the milk truck couldn't get to the barn. Even without snow, sending our milk to town was always iffy. Charlie, the driver, kept a bottle of Four Roses bourbon on his front seat and I never saw it full. One day that winter, as I was clearing our lane in anticipation of Charlie's arrival, snow was blowing out of the northwest faster than I could shovel it and my feet were freezing. Near the barn, I saw a pile of steaming cow manure and jumped into it. Hanging onto my shovel so I wouldn't fall over, the wind and snow howling about me, I decided there must be a better way. I ended up majoring in Greek and Latin, about as far from that particular pile as I could get.

## The Origins of Katywil, Part II: Clothes drying in the attic and a claw foot tub

Almost thirty years after that winter, my Dad, a lifer Lucky Strike man, died of double lung cancer. The day after his funeral, the Washington Post ran a story describing how the town shut down to attend. In the church basement receiving line, most of the people I shook hands with I knew. One I didn't. When I asked him how he knew Dad, he told me that when he moved to

Purcellville, he bought a used pickup. He was puzzled that everywhere he drove, people waved to him, a newcomer. He mentioned this to someone in town and was told, “You’re driving Slim Cole’s truck.”

My mother decided to remain in the farmhouse, and for a while that worked. As she grew more and more infirm, however, her scoliosis, angina, and rheumatoid arthritis made living there increasingly difficult. She was a stubborn lassie, and continued to hang her clothes in the attic and bathe in the claw foot tub. Though we eventually convinced her to accept a microwave and a portable phone, both of which she learned to enjoy, she nixed other conveniences, like a dryer for instance. She used the dishwasher to store her jelly glasses.

She was terrified of having to go to a nursing home. Many of her friends were dying, and progressively she came to rely on younger colleagues of hers when she became an elementary school librarian after the five of us had left home. She was alone a lot, and yet our periodic holiday invasions drained her.

Meanwhile, since leaving college, I had taught English and Latin at Varina High School, named for Jefferson Davis’ wife, outside of Richmond. It was 1969 and my draft number was 36. Driving to Varina as a draft dodger for my interview, I noticed a large homemade billboard in a tobacco field near the school. On it was the peace symbol and in large, crude letters the inscription “Footprint of the American Chicken.”

Despite the billboard, I found I loved teaching and was able to find room and board at the Hogan’s, an elderly couple, who as it turned out, were organic gardeners and devotees of J. I. Rodale, founder of Organic Gardening magazine. The Hogan’s composted their garbage and used no fertilizers or insecticides. I still remember the taste of their tiny, early asparagus. Their life was a revelation to me. Imagine—a life without D.D.T.!

Somewhere I still have Rodale’s green book on composting. That book and multiplying files on underground houses, photovoltaic cells, and ecological living traveled with me through 15 years of teaching in Virginia and Washington, D.C.; two years of working at a museum in Baltimore, Maryland; 12 years of managing institutional relations at Peterson’s Guides, an education publishing company in Princeton, New Jersey; and seven years of marketing consulting in Boston. (While I was teaching at the Madeira School, a girls’ school near D.C., the headmistress, Jean Harris shot her lover, Dr. Hy Tarnower, the author of *The Scarsdale Diet*, but that’s another story.) Teaching at Madeira and St. Albans, both boarding schools, recreated in a way the kind of community experience I had growing up, a reinvention of Purcellville in a way, and I treasured those experiences.

My visits home during these years away found the gradual creep of Washington, D.C.’s suburbs beginning to leap toward Purcellville. After my Dad discovered he had cancer, he sold part of the farm to a developer to provide for Mom, who otherwise would have to have survived on her tiny librarian’s retirement. Though the recession in the early 1990’s slowed the suburb’s spread, by 2002, when Mom had a stroke at home and died two days later in the hospital, Purcellville had quadrupled in size. (Its population today is 6,200.)

My siblings and I had met with Mom six months before she died and agreed to decide the fate of the farm by consensus. It took another six months, but a Virginia Highway Department’s report that 15,000 cars daily passed our farm on Route 7 made up our minds. We sold the property in November 2002 to a high school classmate of mine, a successful developer in the county who killed himself with a shotgun the following spring after his wife left him.

## The Origins of Katywil, Part III: “The ladies,” Carroll Stowe, & the Town Police

As fortunes go, my portion from the sale of the farm was small, but after life in Boston, I longed to find a place in the country. I had looked in Maine, the western Berkshires, eastern and upstate New York, and briefly in Connecticut, when Joanie Schwartz, a realtor friend, invited me to her house in Conway and took me for a drive. That drive changed my life, because that’s when I first saw Colrain.

As I stepped out of her car and saw the land on Stetson Brothers Road, I knew, like my mother, I guess, that this is where I belonged. Stone Mountain loomed ahead; you could see Catamount in the distance and hear Vincent Brook in the ravine below. And the silence! After seven years of listening to the screeches day and night of the car alarm, Boston’s City Bird, the silence was pure gold.

From the beginning of my search, I had been looking for land that would support a small village, one that would engage in the ideas crammed into my Rodale files. This particular property, 112 acres, offered several advantages besides its quiet and beauty. It lay on a series of south-facing alluvial terraces above the West Branch of the North River. The land had belonged to Carroll Stowe’s mother, Hazel, and there were remnants of old orchards and sections of old farm roads. When I met Carroll at Ralph Crosier’s funeral, he told me that the house on the property was the site of his favorite pasture.

The house, which I had eyed as a common house for the village, had been built by “the ladies,” Emily Coleman and Teresa Ferrer. According to Hale Johnson, red-haired Emily was known for her sharp wit and her dinner parties. More demure, Terry was the sister of Jose Ferrer, a movie actor. Audrey Hepburn, married to Jose Ferrer for over a decade, often visited here. Belden Merims’ father, a fly-fishing reporter for the New York Times, had introduced to Colrain the two women, both well known in Manhattan press circles.

The two loved to give dinner parties, luckily enough before the advent of breathalyzers, and their house was made for entertaining. There were four bedrooms, a glassed-in porch featuring a brick rotisserie grill, and a fifty-foot deck overlooking the valley — perfect for my eco-village.

