

*Robert Morgan*

{ IN HIS WORDS }

## Their Lives Would Never Be the Same

**T**he *Road from Gap Creek* opens on a scene in which an ominous black government automobile pulls up at the front door of a remote mountain house. The model for that house is my grandparents' homeplace in Green River, North Carolina.

There was a time when the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina were isolated, almost cut off from the mainstream of American life. People like my grandparents lived on subsistence farms in remote valleys, in hidden coves, or in clearings high on mountainsides. After the Confederate War, the whole South was poor. But because of the lack of roads and lack of schools, the people of the Mountain South were among the poorest of all. In the early years of the twentieth century, my grandpa had so few opportunities to make a living that once a year he loaded his wagon with produce, hams, molasses, and honey and drove down the mountain to Greenville, South Carolina, to peddle his goods door to door. With that money he bought shoes and staples for the winter. The only real industry in the mountains was making corn liquor to sell in towns such as Greenville and Asheville.

It was World War I that began to change all this. As mountain boys were drafted in 1917, trained in camps all over the eastern United States, went to fight in the trenches in France, and returned with their wounds and stories, new life began to stir in the region. Having seen so much of the world, and the horrors and glories of the Western Front, the veterans were not content to live as their ancestors had. Returning soldiers bought Model T trucks and roadsters. Some went to school at government expense, to places such as North Carolina State College.

But with the excitement of the returning soldiers, men who could talk of Chateau-Thierry, Belleau Wood, and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive that brought the Great War to an end, a new horror swept the country. The Spanish Flu took the lives of many thousands, perhaps more than had been killed in the trenches of France and Flanders. And no sooner had the flu epidemic passed than a typhoid epidemic spread down valleys of the Blue Ridge Mountains, including Green River Valley, where my folks lived, killing many more. Sometimes whole families were wiped out.

In spite of the epidemics, or perhaps because of them, the changes to life in the mountains accelerated. The Roaring Twenties affected the mountains, as luxury hotels were built, along with golf courses, lakes, tourist courts. Developers poured into the region, and the price of land skyrocketed. Expecting to grow wealthy, ordinary people went into debt to invest in land, buy new cars. My grandpa—the model for Hank in *Gap Creek* and *The Road from Gap Creek*—who, with his sons, made a good living building summer cottages on Lake Summit, paid off his mortgage and bought a Model A Ford truck.

Then suddenly the bubble burst and set off a chain reaction that quickly reached the Blue Ridge Mountains, even before the crash on Wall Street in 1929. The price of land plummeted, half-finished hotels were left standing, and nearly everyone was in debt. And when the Great Depression really hit, times got much worse. When the banks failed, my grandpa lost his savings. Building stopped, and my grandpa and my uncles were unemployed. My dad, who worked sometimes as a house painter, finished an important job just after the crash. Paid a full fifty dollars, he took the money to Asheville and bought the finest suit he could find. Later he liked to say he had no money throughout the Great Depression, but he had “a mighty fine suit of clothes.”

Only my mother, who graduated from high school in 1930, could find work—as a clerk in the dime store in Hendersonville. She made nine dollars a week for a six-day week. As the model for Annie, *The Road from Gap Creek*'s narrator, she provided most what the family lived on for several years, along with the quarters my grandma made selling eggs and butter at the store on the highway. Eventually my Uncle Robert was able to join the Civilian Conservation Corps and have his allotment sent home each month. But it

would be fair to say that the family depended for years mostly on what they raised in the garden, henhouse, pasture, and hog pen.

Every day hoboes, transients, and the homeless passed on the roads, begging for drinks of water, crusts of bread. Whole families traveled on foot, carrying their few belongings. It was not unusual to find a transient dead beside the road, starved, killed by police, or beaten to death for a pair of shoes, a watch. My grandma—Julie in *Gap Creek* and *The Road from Gap Creek*—never turned away anyone who asked for a bite to eat.

Slowly things did get a little better, and my grandpa occasionally found work as a carpenter. Sometimes he could make an extra dollar by hewing crosssties for the railroad or cutting tanbark. But the only real change for my family came in the late 1930s, when the government began expanding military bases at Fort Bragg, Holly Ridge, and Wilmington. My grandpa got a job building new barracks and hired many family members, including my dad, his son-in-law (Muir in the new novel and the hero of an earlier one, *This Rock*). The men had to live and work away from home, but they made the first decent wages they'd seen in almost a decade.

The changes seen in the Blue Ridge Mountains after World War I were modest compared to the impact of World War II. Every family was touched in some way by the second war. Pearl Harbor galvanized the whole country. Millions joined to serve as war was declared. With most of the boys gone and with gasoline, rubber, leather, sugar, and almost all else rationed, life took on a very different tenor. Everything, including farming, was marshaled for the war effort. Traffic disappeared from the roads, except for the school bus and the mail carrier. People wore old clothes and old shoes, and women really did make dresses out of feed sacks. As Annie will tell you, those who had radios listened every day for news from the Pacific, from North Africa, from Sicily.

And those who had sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers in service lived in dread of receiving a telegram saying a loved one was missing or had been killed in action. Telegrams were often delivered by soldiers in uniform who drove black government cars, the same kind of car that brought the news of my uncle's death to my grandmother—and that brings such news to the character, Julie, based on my grandmother.

The soldiers who did return later would never be the same. They thought

of moving to Florida, to California. The world they returned to was not the one they had left. And they were not the people who had gone away. It would take time to figure out exactly who they were, and what they wanted. And the families of those who did not return would never be the same. Their world and their lives were changed forever. It's that world that is the setting of *The Road from Gap Creek*, a novel I wrote to tell the rest of Julie and Hank's story, what happened to them and to their children after they pulled up stakes and moved on from *Gap Creek*.