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My Coweta

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Living in suburbia years ago, I spent most weekends exploring rural Georgia with my sister and her family. We'd pick a direction and head out of town, the kids making hand-drawn "travel bingo" cards with a stash of cold drinks on the seat between them. Putting the Atlanta skyline behind us marked the official beginning of what we called *adventuring*.

At the first opportunity, we'd find an unexplored back road -- always hoping to spot a grizzled old man in overalls, dipping an ancient coffee tin into a big boiling pot and dishing out deliciously salt-soaked peanuts. We checked out any flea market or antique shop that looked sufficiently disorganized to yield treasures even the shopkeeper didn't know were there. Hours would pass as we wandered old churchyards, speculating on family relationships and the lives of those memorialized with poetic verse and grieving-angel statuary. We gushed at the thrill of turning down an especially dusty road, and developed the rule of always going right, then left, then right again, until we were surely in the middle of nowhere and wouldn't soon be confronted with golden arches.

One summer day in the early nineties, we headed South on I-85 until we found an exit with no sign of fast food restaurants. The ramp looped, and following our rule we turned to the right, with faith that the long stretch of blue road would lead to adventure and not to I-75.

Our faith was rewarded. That day, we peeked through the dusty windows of a charming old school, across from a fruit stand where the kids made a grand mess eating peaches fresh from the vine. We enjoyed the breathtaking spectacle of Starr's Mill in the sunshine, where a couple held hands as they walked along the water. At an abandoned ice cream stand, we shivered with wistful loneliness, imagining long-ago delight as now-grown children took hold of chocolate dipped cones at the broken walk up window...hearing echoed whispers of sweethearts huddled on moldy outdoor benches, in the neon glow of the "Frosty" sign, now scattered and baking on the old asphalt driveway.

We delighted in grand old houses and tumbled-down barns, and gleefully plumaged through treasures in the very best kind of antique store. In an old city cemetery, we had the unexpected pleasure of being approached by a local resident, not to be admonished for letting children scamper through the burying ground, but to be treated to a grave-by-grave narrative of the old town's history. Enraptured by the past, little did I know I was mere miles from my future.

Five years on, I found myself at that very same interstate exit, but turning left and heading for a weekend get-a-way to celebrate a birthday. This time, the blue road would lead to a turning point in my love affair with a man who would become my husband, and the true beginning of my love affair with Coweta County.

It was within the haunting shadows of Bonnie Castle that Nick and I first discussed marriage, our words captured by the faded parlor drapes that had guarded secrets for nearly a century. It was

there that we savored Sunday eggs and Angel biscuits... there that the innkeepers regaled us with stories of textile empires and castle ghosts, town characters and local heroes, lost prosperity and renewed hope. There that we returned, time and time again over the following years, to sit on the veranda and agree, "We want to live in a town like this someday." And it was there that we struck upon a simple shared vision for our future, "We want to have a place. And we want it to be ours. And we want people to come visit."

In 2002, we bought a glorious old farmhouse built in 1861 by Malberry Smith, one of Grantville's early aldermen and member of a civic-minded family that figures prominently in the early history of this area. After a few fitful years of commuting to work in Atlanta, we have finally achieved our goal of actually *living* in Grantville and not just owning a home here. I've been fortunate to obtain full time home-based work and Nick has recently left full time employment to focus on other endeavors, not the least of which is his new role as a member of Grantville's City Council.

Two years ago we opened a restaurant in downtown Grantville, and we strive to be worthy of the loyal affection shown by area residents -- lifetimers and newcomers alike. We've traded in Atlanta-based hobbies for activities like furthering the Grantville auditorium restoration, organizing a local merchants group and helping residents enjoy their community through events like Grantville Citi-Fest and Calico Christmas. We admittedly harbor a dream that our business will someday be considered essential to story of Grantville, and indulge ourselves the vanity of thinking we are passing on the legacy of Malberry Smith and others who served this community.

A dozen years after that memorable adventure in what I now know to be Moreland and Senoia, and seven years past my first fateful visit to Grantville with Nick, we have indeed claimed Coweta as our own. We have found a place...and we have made it ours...and we want people to come visit.