

COMFORT ME WITH APPLES

Author holds fast to a treasured past.

A New York Times best-selling author, Sharyn McCrumb won accolades with the popular "Ballad" historical series set in the North Carolina/Tennessee mountains before the enormous success of her current novel, "St. Dale," a modern Canterbury Tales of ordinary people who go on a pilgrimage in honor of NASCAR racing legend Dale Earnhardt and find a miracle. Published by Kensington Books of New York in 2005, "St. Dale" won Book of the Year from the Appalachian Writers Association and is the winner of the Library of Virginia's 2006 People's Choice Award. A Roanoke County, Va. resident, McCrumb's books, which include "Frankie Silver," the story of the first woman executed in North Carolina, have been translated into more than 10 languages. She has served as fiction writer-in-residence at the WICE Conference in Paris, lectured at Oxford University, the Smithsonian Institution, the University of Bonn, Germany, and universities and libraries throughout the country, and is the recipient of multiple literary awards.

Every year in the middle of October, our rural service organization begins its annual fundraising project: the making of apple butter.

They do it the old-fashioned way.

Club members (including my husband) get up at four a.m. in the crisp autumn darkness to meet at the old brick schoolhouse-turned-community center, where they spend the early morning hours peeling and coring apples to be cooked in a huge copper kettle over an open fire. When the fruit, hand-stirred constantly for hours over a steady flame, cooks down to a slurry of simmering pulp, the cooks add sugar and simmer the mixture for another couple of hours, still stirring, still making sure the heat remains constant beneath the kettle. Finally they add cinnamon and other spices, and cook for a final hour or so.

Then the apple butter is ready to become the perfect addition to home-made biscuits on a breakfast table.

The finished product is stored in quart-sized glass jars and sold locally to fund community projects, like replacing playground equipment.

Since the pioneers settled this Blue Ridge valley in the late eighteenth century, planting apple trees near their cabins, the way of making apple butter has not changed.

But everything else has.

Our community is about as unspoiled as one could hope for 200 years after Daniel Boone passed this way. There are no billboards or housing developments. No strip malls or street lights. Just the same rolling hills dotted with pastures and an occasional farmhouse, same as always.

Different people, though. Almost no one can afford to make a living farming these days, so the occupants of the valley are not the sons of the pioneers who once lived here. Now there is a retired college professor tending sheep, living next door to an environmental engineer and his wife, the author. Down the road is a retired plumber from New Jersey, and a Pennsylvania couple running a bed and breakfast for hikers from the nearby Appalachian Trail. Some of the residents are descendants of families who have lived here for centuries, but they have day jobs now, working in factories in the big city or teaching or fixing cars.

The apples are different, too. These days the apple butter is made from whatever apples are available from local orchards – winesaps maybe, or bland and grainy red delicious. But in the old days, there were strange and wonderful types of apples that are now all but forgotten. These old strains didn't travel well, perhaps, or didn't look cosmetically pretty on grocery store aisles, and so they never became popular for mass production. But time was when there were exotic-sounding fruits to be savored: limbertwig, hog sweet, Virginia beauty, Thomas Jefferson's prized newtown pippin – and a hundred other varieties.

There were apples grown for their ability to last through the winter without rotting. Dessert apples as big as softballs. Blotchy, homely-looking

apples that tasted wonderful – and these mostly gone. Apples had to be brought to the New World, because they did not grow wild here, but their cultivation became a happy science of diversity until the 20th century killed that pastime with its demand for pretty specimens that could be shipped across country, whether they tasted like cardboard or not.

There are a few nurseries that still sell the old varieties, and we planted some rare trees on our farm. We can't stop the world from changing, but maybe we can keep a little bit of the past alive – in a valley unspoiled as the pioneers would have wanted it, and making apple butter with apples like the ones Mr. Jefferson grew.

– Sharyn McCrumb



In her stories, McCrumb captures the essence of life in the southern mountains, blending history and folk culture into a unified whole, "like an Appalachian quilt."