

# Harmless Lies, POETRY and CHEESEBURGERS *All the Way*



In this small town, everyone is kin—in the woods,  
along the Catawba River and in the Claremont Café.



Written by Shari Smith & Photographed by Melissa McGaw

I don't keep up with decisions made by the boys in Raleigh as to deer season. When I come down the hill, ease over the railroad tracks, and through my windshield see the finest people I know gathered around the bed of a pickup truck parked behind the bank, across from the Claremont Café, I know the season opened on Saturday morning. They will have left grits and eggs waiting on the tables to come and stand, staring down, their hands shoved in the pockets of their camouflage coats or bib overalls, their shoulders pulled up to their ears to keep the cold from their necks. They will remark on size and age, ask as to location and time, remember aloud their own hunts, long ago or the morning before, and I will know that a deer is dead and it is worthy of a viewing.

The hand-painted sign out front says Claremont Café, but to locals it's the Pool Room, though there hasn't been a game of eight ball played there since 1970. It's where we go in this small Carolina town to stay up on news and eat grease the surgeon general swears will kill us all. Once a mule was ridden in one door and out the other, and there was also an unsolved robbery when someone stole the stovepipe. Never bothered to call the law. There is the occasional arms deal at the Back Table, and handmade skinnin' knives are often being admired at the counter. You don't have to be armed to eat there, but it's not an altogether bad idea.

Bob Winstead will unbutton the top of his blue jeans before he sits down to eat gravy and toast. As thin as Bob is and has always been, a meal at the Café can test the strength of denim. So tiny he has carried the nickname PeePee—no bigger than a baby chicken—since his working days in the furniture mills of Catawba County, Bob sits every morning at a table with Gary Sigmon and his wife, since she retired. If Bob is missing, he's off hunting. In days long past, Gary Sigmon outran the law in a gold '66 GTO, brought an insurance company to its knees with a can of spray paint and survived a near-death experience involving a septic tank and a John Deere, yet he eagerly awaits Bob's return, knowing there might be a good story to hear. Bob Winstead has always hunted, always fished and always worked. Retirement brought freedom to his schedule but little opportunity for porch sitting. He helps a brother with a broke-down engine or a son crossing his heart and swearing he does not know how that hole got in his daddy's boat.

Bob and his sons put venison and fish in the freezers and on the dinner plates of neighbors all over Claremont, including my own. I've opened my door to find him standing over a cooler, offering enough to feed an army if I am willing to cut up and wrap, and I always am. He once belonged to a hunting club, a group of 10 or so, but now hunts with his boys, Robbie and Kelly, in the pines of Catawba County and just across the line into Virginia, their get-gone for the past some years. They hunt deer and turkeys when the seasons allow and fish the rest of the time. Most of the hunters in our part of the county will put their egos aside and admit that there may be nobody better in the woods than Robbie. He hits what he aims to hit and leaves what he should. Ask Bob if there is anything he always wanted to hunt but didn't, and his answer will be a wink and a smile and a draw on his pipe. "Yeah," he'll say, "but I forgot her name."

C-3, called so for the Charles Connors who came before him, will be on a Naugahyde stool at the counter, and we'll all be sworn to secrecy as to his presence, cholesterol and his longevity being a concern to his wife. He named his 300 acres Wood Duck Bend for the daily flight pattern of those birds from Lyle Creek to his pond. A hen made a home in his woodstove before he could get a cap on the chimney or a fire lit in the cabin he built there, close enough to hear the water running over rocks and around a beaver dam.

## Dogs, quail and Audis

It wasn't family who brought him to the hunt but rather John Busbee and Roland Pope. C-3 walked the railroad tracks that cut through town with Mr. Busbee and his dogs when the broom straw was thick with coveys of quail and rabbits ran in every direction, lining up birds on a bale of straw in the back

of his '78 Audi. The car, the quail and the old men are gone now. Mr. Busbee, a man so kind and good to people that he was forgiven for having been born in South Carolina, was fond of saying that young men hunt behind pointers and old men hunt over setters. We would see him at lunchtime, ordering cheeseburgers to go, taking them back to his corner drugstore, where in retirement he sat near the door and talked to folks coming in for prescriptions or birthday cards. His great-grandchildren are learning now the Busbee tradition of quail and grits and eggs on Christmas morning and



Back Table regulars — (opposite page, clockwise from left) Mike Benfield, Glen Overcash, Sam Willis, Larry Hoke and Jim Bryant — gather at the Claremont Café for stories of hunts both new and old. Charles Connor (above left), better known as C-3, holds down his spot at the counter.

memories of Irish setters that were so much more than pretty redheads.

Mr. Busbee's favorite story was of traveling east near Statesville with C-3 and a borrowed dog not worth the time it took to feed him. With no quail and a sorry dog, the men were offered another dog, a better dog, and used him to find every bird in Iredell County. At the end of a day saved by a good nose, C-3 wanted to buy him. He wasn't for sale at any price, they were told by their host, the owner of the dog. "Aw, everybody's got a price," reasoned C-3, "and I'm willing to pay it." The man refused his offer of \$200, then \$300, and C-3, a man not partial to "no," offered another \$100. The man thought for a minute and said he sure did hate to do it, but if C-3 was willing to part with \$400 for a dog he'd seen hunt only one time, well then, he reckoned he would sell him, and C-3 nodded his head in the self-assured, damn-right confidence of a man who could buy most anything he wanted. He turned to Mr. Busbee and said, "Uh, John, you got any cash? I left mine back in Claremont," and for the 30 minutes it took to get home, Mr. Busbee owned a Brittany spaniel.

Some folks see dollar signs when looking at C-3, and it's true that his checkbook can buy him duck hunting in Alaska and Arkansas, where he swears they are lying about ivory-billed woodpeckers, and he's got himself a gas-guzzling, dualie truck and a shiny Breitling watch. But that same checkbook paid for the fancy bus with soft seats that took us on the four-hour drive to cheer

for the varsity girls' basketball team that earned a spot in the regional championship game, and every now and then it answers a phone call from John Busbee's son at the drugstore when someone can't afford pills that keep a heart pumping good. Besides, C-3 knows that Breitling doesn't keep a bit better time than Bob Winstead's Timex. He just likes pretty things. It's why he married Edie.

His boy, C-4, chooses to sit at the Back Table with men much older than his 20 years. He plants food crops for deer and turkeys and tends to the wood duck boxes he has placed around the creek. He's determined to replenish the quail population of Catawba County by his own hand, calling his daddy from the pen to remind him of the need for another heat lamp. He spends as much time on a John Deere as he does in a study group at Appalachian State, eager to be back in a deer stand or duck blind. On the morning after Thanksgiving his seventh-grade year, the deer that would be his first stood within range as his daddy motioned for him to shoot. So nervous he believed the deer could see his breath, he decided to hold it until the deer was down, only it was C-4 who was down when he passed out due to lack of oxygen and fell to the floor of the stand. The deer splashed into the water of Lyle Creek, while C-3 said, "Give me the gun, Son," and spine-dropped him. Pulling the boy to his feet, he handed him the gun and said, "I think I missed. Get him before he gets gone," as C-4 shot a dead deer. One of them believes it to be a tale of what fathers do for their sons, and another believes his daddy stole his first deer.

### Longing for the land

C-4 will get his degree in risk management and insurance and sit at a desk at the family business because he has a sense of his privilege, that his was a childhood without worries about final notices from Duke Power or if the mill would lay off his momma or daddy, and he is grateful for it. He will take his place in a line of good businessmen, smart businessmen, because he can, because it is what is expected, because he is thankful for the blind luck of his birth. But it's not what he wants. Charles Connor the Fourth wants to farm. He wants to walk the red clay of Catawba County and look to the sky for rain or sun. He wants to stand just below the pines and hear quail call, quail he has nurtured with sorghum crops and cover until his 100 acres

Connor (below) travels far in his pursuit of waterfowl. Bob Winstead (bottom right) often regales Gary Sigmon (second from left) with stories of the hunt.



(Left to right) Jason Carpenter, Ted Sigmon, Josh Sigmon, Stan Sigmon and Jeff Bolick are frequent companions afield. Ted, known for his skills in the woods, says the camo look is unnecessary.

are full enough to provide for his supper. C-4 wants to spend his days free from the chain of a computer screen and an oxford-cloth shirt and ride in his pickup truck with the window down, the wind blowing back the sleeve of his Wing Shooters T-shirt, to the kennel to see if Labrador puppies were born in the night before he comes to the Café for breakfast and to talk to the other farmers, the men who are free.

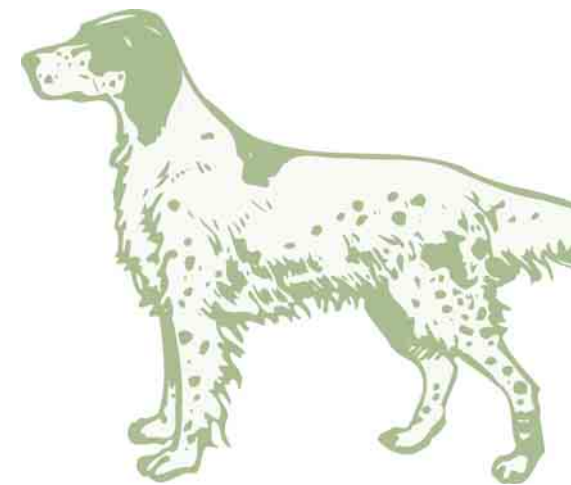
Glen Overcash will be at the Back Table with the others who have earned the privilege of sitting at Claremont's prime spot for harmless lies. Glen has always reminded me of a '50s movie star, the handsome loner who tips his hat and is gone, leaving heartbroken women standing in the dust. I half expect to see him ride in on a pretty paint horse and place six-shooters on either side of his liver-mush-and-egg plate. Sometimes he is gone for a good bit, hunting in Halifax County, where he'd just as soon cook for his buddies as hunt. Glen Overcash can fix the grill at the Café, making him the most important man in Claremont. He and I nearly died laughing the day a belly dancer came sashaying in for the 75th birthday of Sam Willis. There's a picture of it—Sam, his wife and daughters, and a half-nekkid

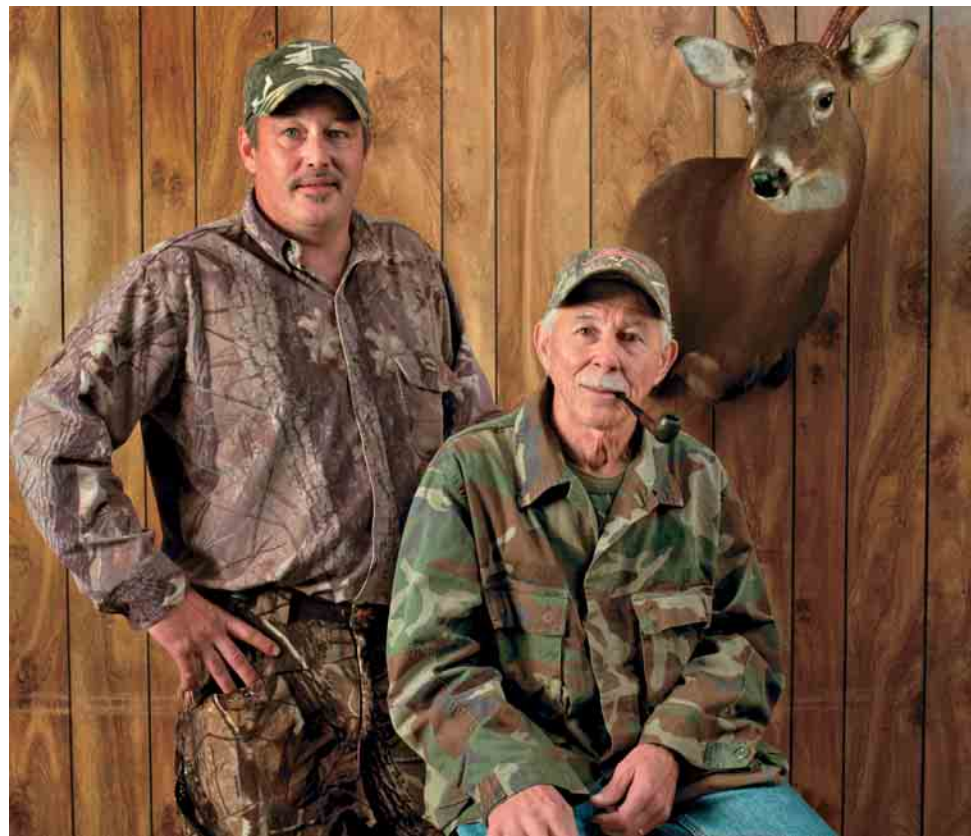
belly dancer—stuck to the wall with black electrical tape. That was a good day.

Mike Benfield will be there, too, at that Back Table. Nobody's man enough to take his chair. Benfield fills up a room, seems bigger than he is, and he's plenty big enough. He knows the river, every bend, every branch of the Catawba, grew up there with a history deep in Catfish—the fire district, not the bottom feeder. He is a deer hunter and a hard worker and a fine friend who will not sell me his 1950 Chevy truck no matter how many real tears I manage to work up. He claims he learned to drive it before he was big enough to reach the pedals but that's a lie. There never was such a time.

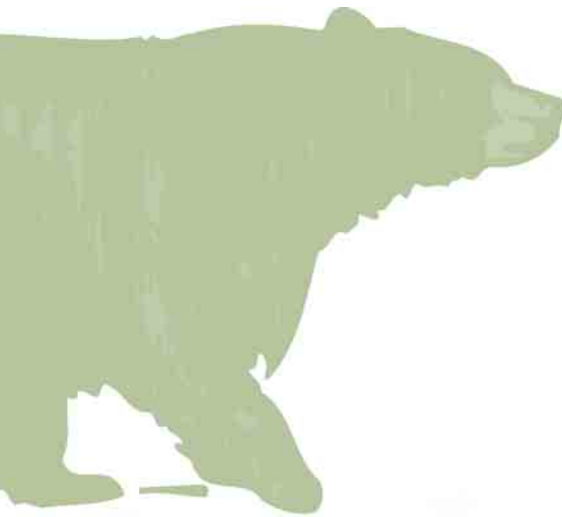
Jim Bryant warrants a place at the Back Table, but sometimes chooses the counter. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of Catawba County history and a talent for explaining to tree huggers that they are late to the party, that farmers and hunters were the first environmentalists. As his children grew, Jim

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Bob Winstead (right) and son Robbie hunt North Carolina and Virginia for turkeys and whitetails and frequently share their game with friends in Claremont.



the backsides of several others, not kin, gathered around, laughing like fools. The Sigmon brothers were born over a span of 25 years, the youngest, Stan at 46, losing his father before he turned 16. It was Joe and Ted, one gone, the other now 66, who put a gun in his hand and squared him toward a running rabbit. For overnight hunts they rigged the back of a pickup with plywood and sleeping bags so they could double the room, sleep six to a truck. The guy on the top level, closest to the tailgate, would have to open the door of the camper shell in the mornings and lift on the handle so the guy on the lower bunk could ease down the gate, but that's not the only example of their resourceful nature.

### Washtub adventure

One member of their hunting party had taken a shotgun along on a deer hunt in case there were no deer but plenty of waterfowl. He saw a pair of wood ducks over the flooded timber of the Roanoke River and dropped them both. The

purchased four identical Ruger rifles to match his own longtime favorite, proof that he knows what does and does not matter. The first one was for a son turning 12; the second to replace the first after Jim left it on the cab of his truck and drove away; the third was the reward he offered for the first, which he kept seven years for the next boy in line; and the fourth when his only daughter graduated from college.

I heard Jim talking one day about mounts, the why of stuffing things killed in the woods and sticking them on a nail pounded in the dining room wall. Jim Bryant painted a prettier picture than writers who have been trying to capture it for decades.

He was talking to the younger hunters and said that he doesn't tote a deer head to a taxidermist to feed his own ego but rather to recall the battle, the grace and fight in the buck, the worthiness of his opponent. "When someone comes into my house for the first time, I point to one and tell his story, remember every sound and smell, and never do I claim it as a victory, his death. I only seem to recall how many times he evaded me." It sounded, for all the world, like poetry.

The Sigmon family takes up a whole table, though usually there are chairs holding up

problem with dropping ducks on a deer hunt is the sorry lack of retrieving dogs or proper waders, and so an abandoned washtub became a makeshift boat. He was a slight man, less than 130 pounds, but turns out washtubs aren't as much for keeping a man dry as they are for keeping his beer cold, and midway between land and ducks, he started to sink. More compassionate friends would show sympathy when telling of a buddy who nearly froze, but the Sigmon boys laugh until tears roll and claim that it's fine because "He didn't die or nothing." No one remembers if he got his ducks.

Stan owns a landscaping company, and without much yard mowing or shrub pruning after November, Stan Sigmon hunts. He knows where the deer hide, where the sweet spot is for ducks along Lyle Creek, and if he was more of a selfish man, he'd keep that information to himself. He has trained his second dog now, a Lab named Drake that circles once before delivering to hand, but there seems little need to fix that, and so they hunt ducks with Stan's son, Josh, and any friend with a license who comes along.

Josh dropped a deer some years ago in Bertie County hunting with his daddy and Jeff Bolick. It was dark by the time they went



## CLAREMONT CAFE



back to get the deer, and Stan, several yards ahead, radioed to Jeff and Josh that a bear had beaten them to it. He could see eyes in the glow of his flashlight and realized his tragic mistake: leaving the gun behind. "He's circlin' me, boys. Stay where you are." They would all learn a valuable lesson that day about leaving guns locked in the cab of a truck, and Stan would learn a thing or two about hunting with Jeff Bolick. When the warning came over the radio, Jeff said, "Let's go, Josh. No sense in all of us gettin' eat."

Josh waited on his daddy.

Josh Sigmon is the best young man I know, and I embarrass him as often as possible by telling him so. Some folks are born good. They grow good and the good of them lasts into forever. You can just tell. This past Fourth of July he pulled at me when the DJ fired up a sweet song by the Van Zant boys, the one telling Mr. Young his presence is not required in the South, and I danced with a good-lookin' boy barely legal for the first time in close to 30 years. Josh prefers to duck hunt but is in the corn fields during dove season and in a tree stand when allowed by law. This year, he applied for his first tundra swan permit. I sure hope he gets a bird. I sure do.

His uncle Ted is really more a grandfather to him and tortures the boy in ways only grandfathers are allowed. Ted is a cattle farmer, spends early mornings crunching frost under his feet while he checks on the young ones, the ones due any day, and when he can't or won't go hunting with Stan and Josh, he calls their cell phones to get the count. Stan said, "Even if we haven't hit a thing, I tell him, 'We're stackin' 'em up like cordwood.'" If they go home empty-handed, they claim to have left some for seed.

Ted knows they're lying and gets even by dropping deer on days the younger generations never see one. To Jason Carpenter, a family friend, this is particularly irritating. His daddy didn't teach him to hunt. Don Carpenter would rather be brushing the cockleburs from the tail of a brood mare, so Jason taught himself to use a bow and spends a fair amount of time hunting with the Sigmons. "I bought every piece of equipment they make, the base layer, scent block shirts and pants and jackets, and I even got a pair of them 1,000-gram boots. Ted walks in the woods with blue jeans and that same tan

jacket he wears every day and a pair of white-damn tennis shoes and kills a buck." Ted tells Jason that his money's been wasted. "I spit on their backs when they walk under my tree stand. It don't bother them."

It is often the Sigmon Landscaping truck I see parked behind the bank, admirers peering over the side. They tend to bring their deer to the Pool Room before putting them in the freezer. Josh told me once that it is part of their tradition, letting everyone have a look. "Yeah, if it's a good one, one worth showing off, Dad will say, 'Let's ride him around till he rots.'"

### Tradition of guns

David Carpenter is likely to pull a chair up to the Sigmon table. David graduated from Bunker Hill High School with a 3.8 GPA, a gold tassel and two awards for top rifleman in the district. He started with a Chipmunk .22 and a squirrel in his own backyard, after which his momma took his picture and stuck it in his baby book with photographs of missing teeth and first haircuts. Most of the birthdays and Christmases of his 20 years have brought a gun, appreciation for firearms being a part of his family. His momma—my best-good girlfriend—and I were shopping one day last summer for cute shoes and silver bracelets. I was trying out a new shade of lipstick when she asked if we had time for a



The Café is the center of town life, whether it's the visit of a belly dancer for Sam Willis' birthday (above) or the showing off of a nice deer in the parking lot across the street.



Paw Gantt believed a man should hunt every day and was ill with Brian when girls and cars took a place among his interests. He needn't have worried. Brian Hefner would hold to the belief that a man belongs in the woods.



COURTESY OF GANTT FAMILY



At age 88, Floyd Gantt managed to manhandle his deer into the trunk of his LTD. Grandson Brian Hefner (left, opposite page) still carries the spent cartridge from that hunt.

quick stop. "I need to run by and pick up my concealed carry permit. Gotta stay legal!"

David was born an old man. He frets and worries over things and will squeeze a nickel till it squeals, but he paid cash for his shiny pickup and his four-wheeler and has earned his reputation as a hard worker. A woman from a local furniture mill, working in the sewing room with his mamaw, saved her husband's guns for 15 years after he died, knowing her children would sell them with no thought to their time on the shoulder of a hunter. Upon David's high school graduation, she laid them before him and told him to take his pick. He chose well, a Browning A-5 with engraving and a smooth walnut stock, the gun of a real bird hunter, and so it hunts again, serves another good man.

David hunts doves and ducks with Josh Sigmon, but he hunts deer with his uncle Brian. Brian's grandfather Floyd Gantt Sr. took him on his first hunt, had him lay out of a day of second grade to hunt over on River Bend Road because by that time the die was cast. When he was 3, Brian's momma had bribed him to stop sucking his thumb with the promise of a BB gun, a promise she made good on. He rushed the mailbox with that BB gun one day when an 8-point buck stood eating the acorns that had fallen around it.

He missed.

Brian hunted rabbits and squirrels on his own but trailed his grandpa and well-bred pointers and setters through pines so high they disappear in blue sky. Paw Gantt believed a man should hunt every day and was ill with Brian when girls and cars took a place among his interests. He needn't have worried. Brian Hefner would hold to the belief that a man belongs in the woods. He would be with David when at age 12 he got his first deer, take him to HG and H Bait Shop to have his picture made and put on the wall, and he would provide for his aging grandfather the same opportunity.

Brian hauled slabs to the woods and built a blind on the ground so an old man wouldn't have to climb, one that would keep the wind from his grandfather, allowing him to stay in the woods all day if that's what he wanted. Inside he placed a sturdy chair with a thick cushion and hung an extra coat on the wall. He kept apples and other snacks close by in case his grandfather

took hungry waiting on his trophy buck.

Floyd called Brian at work one day and said to come on home, he needed help with a deer. Brian thought he was to go to the woods, but Floyd Gantt had wrestled the buck into the trunk of his LTD and brought it on to the house. "I got him in, but I can't get him out."

He was 88 years old.

Brian helped him, but not before he took him to HG and H, the same as he had for his nephew, got his picture made and put it on that famous bulletin board. He took his grandfather home and cleaned the deer, put the meat in the freezer and made one more stop before going to bed. Brian Hefner went back to the woods, back to the deer stand and picked up the shell casing, a .30-06, and put it in his pocket. It has been with him every day since then and was in his pocket the day they buried his grandfather, a year ago this January. He was 97.

### Life lived with hunters

There may come a day when I can't keep up with the light bill, but I will never go hungry. The men in my life are hunters. They are my family, though I am not blood kin to any one of them. Some say it is the way of a small town, but that's not always so. It is so in Claremont. If there was ever any doubt, it burned away on a gray day last November when my pretty little house with the wrap-around porch and fish-scale shingles sent black smoke into the sky. Some shed their camo and donned the coats of the volunteer fire department to fight back the flames with hoses and axes. When Gary Sigmon got the call, he rushed to my side so fast he didn't hang up the phone before grabbing the truck keys and yelling at his wife to "Come on." We stood on the hill and watched it burn. Gary never spoke a word. In one hand he held the ever-present cigarette, and in the other he held on to me. The toughest man I know cried that day. I won't soon forget that.

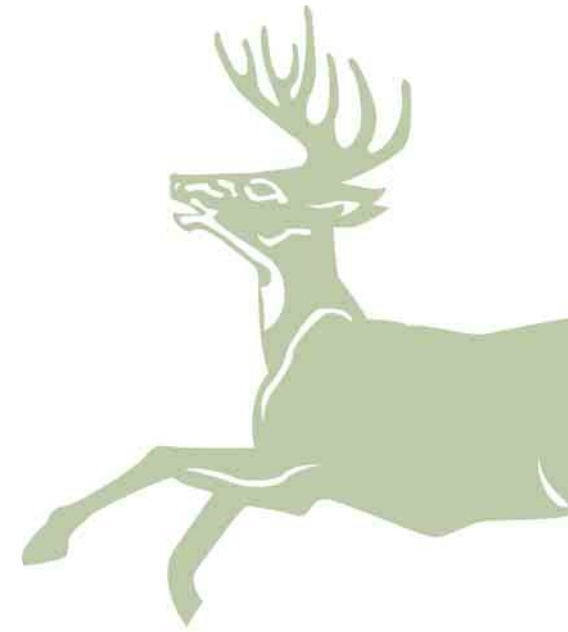
In the days after the fire, the men of the Claremont Café shoved paper money in my hand and issued warnings not to trust insurance folk. The young boys carried out what they could and didn't talk much. When there was nothing more to save, they looked at their own boots, shifting from one to the other, soot and ashes temporarily taking from them their youth and laughter. Months later they joked and taunted each other with claims of superior strength as they backed their pickups to a new porch and unloaded furniture, some new, some restored, stopping to listen for gobblers in the woods that now surround me. The old men tell me stories that connect me to the history of the new place in the same way they made me proud to live in the one now gone and try their damndest to tell me what to do.

They argue over the best way for me to feed deer and turkeys and called me hardheaded when I took to painting my barn with a brush. They volunteered to run off a worthless man and threatened to disown me if I didn't make

an effort to hang on to a good one. They are my family, my daddies and granddaddies, my brothers, my own young'uns. They are my heavenly band full of angels, come to keep me close and set me free. They wear the clothes of workingmen who dip snuff and cuss like it's an art, and when it comes their time, St. Peter will know he's lucky to have them and that there will be no dragging me through those pearly gates if they aren't there. Better someone ride me around till I rot.

Things change, the way we listen to music, the shows on television and, for me, the direction I turn on my way to the Claremont Café. But if it's not Ted or Stan Sigmon it will be Josh and someday it will be Josh's own boy showing off when I see the gathering, men looking down into the bed of a pickup truck, and I will know that the season started on Saturday morning, that a deer is dead and is worthy of a viewing. ♦

Shari Smith can be found most mornings at the Back Table of the Claremont Café.



David Carpenter (right) continues the family tradition of the hunt instilled in him by his uncle Brian and grandfather Larry Hefner.

