



For almost six months now (since April!), I have been waiting for my new cabin to be hooked up to utilities: water well drilled, septic tank and leech field put in, electric line hung and phone connected. With contractors' busy schedules, dodging the occasional showers and storms, and other unforeseeable glitches, things have been put off and put off and put off.

Meanwhile, I've been "going natural" for the bathroom, using lanterns and candles in the evening, taking water from a big thermos, refrigerating food in a cooler, bathing in my neighbor's pond and, for the most part, loving it all. But as August turned to September, I started getting nervous.

The biggest task of the summer was trying to find an 80 year old man named Shirley Clendenin. He is the absentee landowner of the hayfield across from me. I needed his signature notarized so the Electric Company could have right-of-way onto his property to hook me into the closest pole.

After talking with all the neighbors and googling "Clendenin" on every peoplesearch site on the Internet, I finally learned the name of his town from public records at the court house. The elusive Shirley lived somewhere down in Marmet, West Virginia, 90 miles south of here past Charleston. But his address was listed as "general delivery" and his phone number was disconnected. Marmet's kind post master, Charlie, was unable to give me a specific address over the phone due to the "Privacy Act" but he promised to pass on my number when/if he saw the man again. I waited a few more weeks to hear something and then I made my decision.

It was time for the wild goose chase to begin. All I had to go on was his town, his name, his age, and the fact that he was known to be a crotchety, uncooperative ole bugger. Rather than

knocking on doors, I was tipped off by my friend, Wess, that the local Barbershop would be a good place to start. "Someone should know him in there if he's that old." So, the day after Labor Day, in a driving rain, I headed south on Interstate 64 past Charleston. Through creaky wiper blades flailing water back and forth, I could see the gold dome of the capitol building flanked by misty mountains and hovering clouds.

Marmet (population 1,626) is a small industrial town just beyond the big city, tucked in the Kanawha River valley. Pulling off the highway ramp, I wove into downtown passing the great cylinders of natural gas refineries in the distance. I quickly spotted the dingy white sign with chipped blue paint designating "Don Gay's Barbershop" on the main drag. The tiny building was no more than 12' x 12'. I parked and ran from my truck through the slanting rain, smiling when I saw a man through the foggy window. Here we go! Don is in his mid 60's, a master of his own trade, with a white smock, neatly groomed salt and pepper hair, trimmed eyebrows and a close shave at the nape of his neck. He was alone in his shop, stretched out in his one barber's chair, his back to the mirror, reading Sunday's church bulletin in his lap.

Other than looking up, Don's position didn't shift at all when, bedraggled and soaking, I made the bells jingle over the door of his parlor. By the sparse décor, free of flounce and fuss, it was apparent he had a male-dominated clientele and I was a bit out of place. Even through his dead pan expression, I could tell he was perplexed. He didn't know Shirley, nor had he ever heard of him. He showed slightly more interest in my dilemma, my summer lifestyle and my courageous quest. "Well," he said in a slow drawl, "if anyone knows him, it would be Emmet Cunningham. They're about the same age, and Emmet sings in the church choir." Otherwise, I could try the fire department and "am-boo-lance" since they would have 9-1-1 information on him. The latter made more sense, but after hearing the barber tell Emmet's entire life story, likely learned over years of cutting the same hair, I wanted to meet the man.

Before heading in the direction of the Interstate, I backtracked to stop by Don Gay's Barbershop. The sun was now shining, but it didn't look like he had budged an inch since we first met. I barged in under the jingling door like an old friend, "I found him! And I just wanted to thank you." Don was still stretched out, his hands were clasped behind his head and his legs were crossed. The only proof he had done anything different in my absence were the tufts of white hair around the base of the swivel chair. "You did, huh?" I took a seat on the bench next to him and started the whole story.

No Emmet, but Harley, the boy behind the counter, Evelyn, the mayor, his pal, Freddie, Lucille, the puppy, the fishermen, the Notary and all about Shirley. "Well, I'll be," he said with a huff. Don looked off to the upper corner of his little shop. It seemed he had been thinking about my situation throughout the day and had more questions. "And you say you've been living up there without 'lectric for how long?" "How'd you say yer heating?" "What do you do up there in Roane County?" I guess I answered each one adequately because then he paused. "You don't have a man?" he said in a mixed tone that verged on tender concern and bit of wonder. I shrugged my shoulders and opened my mouth, but by his quick change of topic, I could tell he felt he had gotten too personal for his own liking. We talked a good while longer and then I got up to leave.

As I said goodbye and headed for the jingle bells, a short scraggly man in his forties with a cap on his head stepped in and held the door for me. A waft of stale beer came in behind him. "Hi, Don," he said cheerfully. Don stood up and went for his broom, "You take care, now," he waved to me with one hand and motioned with the other, "Hey, Roy, take a seat."

Now, it's the end of September and the water in the pond is cold. I'm back to solar heated bucket baths. The leaves are taking turns fluttering to the ground so as to have each of their glorious flights be recognized. Nights are chilly and I'm running low on lamp oil. But, I shouldn't have to purchase more. The Electric Company was out today to start on the line.

behind the counter were dressed to a T. A large chandelier hung above the colonial style table and chairs in the center of the lobby. I think it was a little intimidating for him.

Directly to our left was a puny office trying to hold a large young woman with blond hair behind her desk. She had the same expression as the Mayor. “Yeah, I’m the Notary,” she scowled begrudgingly. We each took a step toward the chairs across from her and I was glad she chose not to stand as Shirley would have been dwarfed and easily lost in the room. I explained that we needed his signature notarized so the Electric Company could have right-of-way on his land to hook up to my property. The woman reviewed the form and without raising her eyes said, “It’ll be a dollar.” I leaned back, shoved my hand in my pocket and pulled out a \$20 bill. Shirley reached over the arm of his chair and whispered, “They should be able to make change for you. It’s a bank after all.” I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw the young woman smirk for the first time as she scribbled on the form and reached for her stamp.

“Sign here,” she pointed her pen to the line for me. Then sliding the paper in Shirley’s direction, “Now, you.” He bumped his chair against the back wall as he stood. As if to muster courage, he adjusted the pen in his hand and the sleeve on his arm. Then, without needing to lean over the desk too far, he slowly scratched out his name with an official air. Gazing at the final product with disappointment, he fidgeted and sighed, “I’m a little nervous.” I patted him on the shoulder from my seat and chuckled, “It’s okay. You’re not signing your life away.” This time, the lightness with which all three of us smiled seemed to gain us some space in the room.

Out in the parking lot, I made an honest fuss thanking him and tried twice before Shirley graciously accepted the \$19 for his time and gas. “You’ll have to let us know how it all works out,” he said as he shook my hand one last time. I promised to do so and we said goodbye.

At Don’s suggestion, I headed to the Hardware store just down “the two-lane.” Emmitt would have been working on small engines in the basement, but he wasn’t in that day. I was directed upstairs to ask for Harley. As I breached the top of the steps, a towering, oddly tanned, middle aged man in shorts and a sweatshirt greeted me all too enthusiastically. “How can I help you?” he ruffed. His large, glaring used-car-salesman smile was only partially hidden behind a snow white mustache. Obviously, this was Harley. All-knowingly, the manager announced with self importance, “I have found in my experience, the best place to go when I’m looking for someone’s whereabouts is... the Pizza Parlor.” Then, in a bit of a dramatic hush as if he were letting me in on juicy small-town gossip, he added, “The delivery guy knows where *everybody* lives.” At this, I caught the eyes rolling of the young slender clerk behind the counter. Quickly looking down at the cash register, he mumbled, “Or you could try City Hall. Freddie would know him.”

My anticipation mounted with this news. Freddie had all my answers. The clouds started breaking up and the rain slowed to a drizzle. I took it as a hopeful sign that I was getting closer to my destination. I made my way to City Hall next, where, Freddie, the Chief of Police, has his office next to the mayor’s. The dark, simulated wood-grain paneling didn’t brighten much as the sun sifted through the glass door onto the floor of the entrance hall. From the back office I heard a small voice squeak, “I’m in here!” The tiny but stout receptionist was at least 75 years old with a wild nest of bottle-dyed hair, screaming red under the fluorescent lights. Her chubby face was heavily painted. The blotches of rouge on her upper cheeks and the bridge of her brow indicated it may have, with steadier hands, accentuated the slimmer beauty of another time. But her polyester lavender pantsuit and jacket was a good effort in style and convinced me of a warm disposition.

Freddie was out to lunch and Evelyn apologized in sing-song intonations for not having the garbage collection receipts. “Certainly, we would be able to find your Mr. Clendenin with

those, but the boys took them this morning to update the computer files.” When she started walking her soft, pudgy fingers through the government pages of the phonebook for more ideas of who to contact, I noticed her perfect manicure. Then, slamming the book shut, she promptly got up. “Oh, this is silly, Sweetie. Let’s just go ask him.”

We walked around the corner to the open doorway of the mayor’s office. Neither the elderly man behind the desk, nor his crony sitting perpendicularly to him on a brown plaid couch, gave me a glance. The mayor’s head dropped, his lips pursed and his eyes peered over wire rim glasses. His tall torso slightly stiffened proving mild annoyance with Evelyn. Whatever these two women wanted could not have been more important than the business they were attending to (which didn’t sound much like business to me from the low chuckles we had heard previously). His old friend stared with boredom at the wall across from him. The interruption was clearly drab and bothersome.

Evelyn stood her ground comfortably with one hand on her hip, and with fierce determination to focus them on our plight, she explained my predicament to the last detail. “Now, winter’s coming on, and this girl needs her ‘lectric!” The men lazily drew their eyes to each other and initiated their own half-hearted conversation which included a litany of Clendenins, one with a bum leg, another one too young, one who lived out past the mill plant and recently had a stroke, and none of whom had Shirely as a first name. “Oh...!” Evelyn turned around and shooed her hand like swatting away barn flies from behind her. I followed the brisk clapping of high heels back to her desk and she picked up the phonebook again. “Those two are as worthless as tits on a boar hog.”

While she jotted down numbers of the Kanawha County Sheriff’s office for me, a man I assumed to be Freddie slipped into the mayor’s office. He sat down out of direct view from me on another couch facing the mayor. I could just see the tips of his polished coal black shoes and the brown paper lunch bag

lawn. The signature of this little man walking so purposefully ahead of me, would give me, for the first time since I moved to West Virginia, lights without fear of fire, a flush toilet inside, copious amounts of hot and cold running water from a tap and, if I so chose, winter heat at the touch of a dial. Despite my reclusive wooded surroundings, I would be practically right up there with the suburbs! Lucille broke into my daydream by calling, “You dropped your keys!” I ran back to the steps and took my truck keys from her with both hands, thanking her again for her kindness and hospitality. “You just come back and visit us now, y’hear? Anytime.”

Through the back window of the full-sized maroon Chevy pick-up, I could barely see the crown of Shirley’s head above the bench seat as he led the way for me out of the holler. “No sense you comin’ all the way back here after we get them papers signed,” he had said when we left the trailer. It was a practical suggestion, but I was a little disappointed because I wanted to see Lucille again. After the third low-water crossing, he pulled over to let another truck pass, then, he barreled on. Two men in the cab craned their heads around to see Shirley’s tires splash water out of a pothole, then, they looked to me. The driver stopped to open his door (sometimes the windows don’t roll down). “Ya know where’s a good place to catch some minners?” I yelled back over the engines, “That old-timer would have known, but I’m trying to keep up with him!” They laughed, waved and were on their way with fishing poles and a net flopping in the bed of the truck.

We pulled into the bank’s parking lot and I sidled my truck to a halt between the yellow lines next to him. I grabbed the form from the Electric Company and my I.D. off the passenger’s seat. We walked around the left-over glistening rain puddles and up to the front door. He held the first door open for me and I held the second for him. He giggled. We both squinted to adjust our eyes from the light outside and upon entering, Shirley got very quiet. Even for a small town bank, it was very posh. Huge fancy vases held dried flowers and there were Monet prints on the wall in ornate gold frames. All the ladies

boots, at least three sizes too big, protruded out from beneath his pair of work khaki's held up with a John Deere belt buckle. His hand was small but calloused in my grasp and his scalp held desperately to white wisps surrounded by a monk's ring of hair. Stiffly but quickly he moved the newspaper off the recliner and motioned for me to sit. Then, he sat beside his wife on the couch.

In many Appalachian homes I visit, I experience severe contention with the volume on the television set. No matter how many times we ask each other to repeat what was said, the knob is never turned down. Since there is usually a chance that someone in the room is hard of hearing, I raise my voice to compensate, and this was no exception.

"I AM *SOOOO* HAPPY TO MEET YOU!" I shouted. It could have been the decibels or the excitement that prompted them to be so friendly with me. But I suspected they were just glad to have some company willing to come out here, regardless who it was, or how crazy she seemed. At the top of my lungs, I relayed my saga for the umpteenth time. Shirley was anything but curmudgeonly. They both grinned and nodded politely and I realized their responses were neither as loud as mine, nor did they ever ask me to repeat. I guess I continued shouting just to hear myself. We chatted for at least half an hour about their kids and grandkids, the puppy, the property he owned across from mine and the price of land. Shirley asked a few questions about what exactly was needed from him. I reiterated I just needed his signature notarized and I had all the paperwork in my truck. "Well, Lucille," he lifted his hand and watched it drop to the couch cushion next to him, as if to let the weight of it squish some imaginary bug. He looked up at his wife, "Looks like I'm going to town."

We all stood at the same time and the puppy lost control again. I scooped her up and Lucille took her from me, steadying the pup in one arm against her chest so as not to allow her to follow Shirley and me out the door. The last seven years flashed before my eyes as I made my way across the front

dangling from his fist over the arm of the couch. "Good! He's back early." Evelyn shot back up and pattered around the desk again calling to him.

Freddie bounded off the couch and into the hallway at the sound of her voice. The trim 50 year old man was at her service, bedecked in a crisply pleated officer's uniform. He reminded me of an Elvis impersonator with his jet black wavy hair and dapper sideburns. "This young lady wants to talk to you." Evelyn prodded me with silent reassurance that said no Privacy Act was going to stop her Freddie, the Chief of Marmet's Police Department, from helping a damp and desperate "ferriner"(my Ohio accent must have given me away). She stood by my side for a moment and I cut to the chase. "Do you know where Shirley Clendenin lives?" He said, "Sure!" Evelyn slipped back to her office.

The southwestern turquoise stones on Freddie's watchband clacked as he amicably waved his arm in the direction I should be heading. "Just take this road out here to the left. Then..." I was surprised he didn't ask me who I was or why I wanted to know. Freddie continued, "Take the first right at the edge of town that goes under the overpass. That's Rush Creek Run. Go up that holler a *long* way. Now, you're going to think you're lost, *really* lost, but just keep following that road over five low water crossings. Count 'em. Five. They shouldn't be up too high today. I don't think it's rained enough to flood them out. He'll be that first house on the left, way up in that holler. It's a little run down but you won't be lost. That's where you'll find him."

With a jolt of excitement, I assured him it didn't sound more difficult than getting to my house. I thanked kind Freddie then peeked into Evelyn's office. "Oh, honey, twern't nothin'. Glad we could help." Exiting through the glass doors into the bright sunlight, I got a rush of warm, steamy air, the kind you get after a good rain on a hot day.

I followed Freddie's directions out of town, through roadside puddles and under the noisy overpass of I-64. The echoes of traffic faded as I bumped off the pavement into a lush green holler with the creek bulging on one side. Tributaries of run-off from the deep, dark hillsides gushed with water and spilled over onto the dirt road. One, two, three low water crossings. I slowed down for a nonchalant family of wild turkeys to find their way into the brush, none too disturbed by my half ton truck. Four and five low water crossings.

My little Ford Ranger eased up next to an old broken down pick-up overgrown with weeds next to a gravel driveway. I slid out and made my way to the run down house, stepping carefully through wet grass that hadn't been mowed all season. I hate the feeling of soggy socks in my tennis shoes all day, and although I knew I was in the right place, there was still no guarantee Mr. Clendenin would be home. An old pair of work boots set on the precarious front steps. The only thing keeping the warped door closed was a large rusty Master Lock. Peering through the window, I could tell the house had been abandoned, yet it didn't look like it had been that long ago. They were either too hurried or too tired to make a clean sweep of the disheveled place. A bottle of dish washing detergent was left next to the cockeyed kitchen sink. What if Shirley was dead? ... *inside*? Freddie only gave me directions and told me that's where I'd find him. He didn't say the guy was alive.

I shook the thought when I heard a rooster crow from the clearing behind the house. Someone must live nearby. Walking around the side of the house, another thought struck me. I could have been wandering into a scene from Deliverance, which would be more of a terror than the adventure I was anticipating. But if Shirley Clendenin was still alive and was really 80 years old, I felt pretty confident I could take him. A feral cat stopped dead in its tracks to stare at me, then darted under rotting clapboards at the base of the house.

It is often the case in Appalachia that when the homestead falls apart, it's less expensive than repairing to just pick up and

move to a mobile home trailer in the back. It is also common for offspring to set up housing near their parents on land that is already paid for and will be theirs someday anyway. So, when I saw the humble trailer, my heart leapt more in gladness than in terror over the two mangy, yipping, ankle-biting dogs protecting it. If this wasn't Shirley, it must be one of his kids. I cooed to the little monsters in an attempt to put them at ease, walked up to the door and knocked.

A slow, feeble woman about my height dressed too warmly for the temperature outside creaked open the door and started to bend down. "It's okay, I got her," I said as a wiggling ball of energy threw itself at me through the threshold. The precious miniature black and brown Dachshund, no more than 7 or 8 weeks old, could not contain herself as her tail made her whole body wobble back and forth at lightning speed. I would not advise simultaneous jumping, wiggling and wobbling so quickly for anyone whose stature holds him or her more than three inches off the ground. This could lead to a severe concussion.

"Please, come in!" the frail woman said with a sweet, toothless smile. There I was, just a minute ago, worrying about my own personal safety and this fragile stick of a thing with her clothes hanging from her thin frame, living on the far backside of beyond, welcomes a total stranger in her home, no questions asked. Before stepping through, I gave a brief account of who I was, why I was there and who I was looking for. "Well, that's my husband, now come on in here."

It would be a little much to say that the sky opened and cherubs sang as sunlight flowed down in streams like Jacob's ladder. But, I had reached my promised land. There I was, face-to-face, or rather, chest-to-face, with a very short Shirley Clendenin, no more than five feet tall. I fumbled with the puppy to place her at my feet and returned an extended hand to him. He wore a long-sleeved plaid shirt with the cuffs rolled up to his forearms. I always find something gentlemanly about a man wearing an undershirt regardless of the heat. Giant