

BLUE MUD

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CLAYTON

Clayton, Population 400.

Nothing else and no pride proclaimed about any famous person from there. Clayton is the kind of place you drive right past—and many do.

I am aware that Mr. Meecham, the curator of the one and only, very small historical museum, probably tires of saying, "Originally, the town is called Fayette for the Marquis de Lafayette, who helps the Americans during the Revolutionary War. Then in the mid-1800s it is changed to Claytown to honor Henry Clay, the senator from Kentucky."

And somewhere along the line, it becomes Clayton.

I know Mr. Meecham tires of telling the same facts over and over, but I love hearing them. The museum at one time is open four days a week; now it's just open Monday afternoons.

With its founding on the banks of the Main Whiling River, Clayton is a big city but as river traffic gives way to railroads and then automobiles, Clayton becomes smaller and smaller. By the time I move there, Clayton is well on its way to disappearing.

Everybody knows everybody. There's no "drug problem." Parents don't worry about their kids going trick or treating. Racism doesn't rear its ugly head to those of us too unknowing, naïve or unaware about it. The "n" word is not mentioned in either a derogatory fashion or mean way. You have to know the "wrong words" so as not to use them in public; otherwise we'd never know not to call Mr. Meecham an old fart to his face.

It's a good place to grow up. As you come across the "new" bridge, Maple Street runs along the river on the bottom of town, then out of town through the railroad underpass. Finn Avenue runs up from the bridge through the middle of town (the "business district") and connects back up with Maple Street. Five streets connect to Finn including the one that goes over the railroad. The five streets, from North to South (the way you're headed as you come into town) are Front, Church, Peoples, Simpson and Grant (the street that goes over the railroad. The last is for General Ulysses S. Grant, not for a family that lives near Clayton). Is it tongue in cheek that the Methodist and Christian meeting places are on a street named Church? High Street connects the five streets on the east end of town. Then there's a road leading to where the Baptist church and the subdivision are. So what if there's only one street, a church and 12 houses?

Clayton has a drugstore (where I learn to play Euchre), a beauty shop (where Grandma goes every Thursday), a barber shop (the only difference between a good haircut and a bad one is about two weeks), a pool hall (the product of a misspent youth), an auction house (you can get most anything here), a bank (you can count--big deal), a post office (three employees, one of them in a wheelchair, can easily handle two shifts and all home deliveries), a general store (with its owner, the man with no fingers), a funeral home (next to the meat plant/general store--I hope the delivery man doesn't get mixed up), a lumberyard (that doubles as a hardware store), a rest home (across the street from the funeral home--bad planning on somebody's part), a garage (where they always have parts left over after working on your car), a school (Go, Cougars!), a TV repair shop (where the burglar alarm has such a hair trigger that even a passing car can set it off), a church for every denomination (it is the South) and a volunteer fire department (they never lose a foundation). During Spring and Summer, the area is all green and appealing; Fall is beautiful with the leaves on the trees every shade of orange and red but parts of the county look like the face of the moon in Winter because of all the strip-mining and the trees don't shield the view. There's not nearly so much as the Eastern part of the state but it's still not pretty to look at.

Everything else is residential. And everyone knows who lives in each house. All along Maple Street are the Dukes, Emma, her "friend" Karen, and Emma's nephew, Andrew (word got around quickly that Emma is going to wear a dress to a funeral. No one has ever seen Emma in a dress.); the garage; the Dolans (they cause quite a stir when they leave the Baptist church to become Jehovah's Witnesses); the Cowlings (once, he is the president of the Clayton bank); the Sheets (older than dirt); the Milfors (Mr. Milfor and his son both teach school); the Harrisons (she is a scandal when she is pregnant at 15); the Graves (a retired couple--she teaches me how to play Canasta); and the Smiths (actually it's just Miss Smith, the "old maid").

Elsewhere in town are the Boyles (Olena Boyle, the town busybody); the Towns (always in trouble); the Raness (in England the oldest son would be called a "Nancy boy"); the Rivards (Henry and Louise and their daughter. He owns a TV repair shop but his burglar alarm is always going off); the Fries (if Clayton were a trailer park, they'd be right at home. When their house burns, it does twenty thousand dollars worth of improvement); the Graves ("Daddy", Eliza and their son, "Junior"); Daddy's real name is Alfred, Junior's real name is James. Junior is the meanest kid in town; he naturally grows up to become Chief of Police. The same thing happens in Falcon; Bobby Ohern, whose every other word is "fuck," becomes county

sheriff. His real first name is Lucious, so Junior doesn't seem so bad.

Although he replaces a guy named Lucifer "Junior" Shielding. Go figure.

At least with the Shieldings there is a Lucifer, Sr. and a Lucifer, Jr. so

calling the son "Junior" isn't too big a stretch. And, of course, in Clayton

there is Mr. Meecham, who collects Henry Clay memorabilia. Mr.

Meecham is a portly, balding gentleman who says he hates Henry Clay, but

is the only person I know that has a Clay-Frelinghuysen campaign banner.

(Frelinghuysen is a senator of New Jersey and Clay's running mate in the

1844 presidential race against James K. Polk.)

I guess we're just immune to everybody and don't notice so we don't give their idiosyncrasies a second thought. It's just the way they are.

Gone are the livery, the creamery, the hotels, the assayer's office, the movie house and the whorehouse (even the prostitutes leave). There are no traffic lights but we do have a couple of stop signs. We do have a one-way street, where the Methodist church is, next to the old Oddfellow's Lodge (they close for good in the '60s). The railroad has one track and there is one road into town. The train runs in the morning and again at night but it doesn't stop anymore. If for any reason you want to exit at Clayton, tell the engineer and he'll slow down so you can jump.

Clayton still holds elections but the no one ever actually really does anything. When the schools consolidate, Clayton loses its school and seemingly its sense of direction.

Then comes the Flood of 1977 that destroys most of the town. Clayton rebuilds after other floods but this one is particularly devastating. People expect flooding of the basement, but not the whole house! Most don't have the will or desire to rebuild. For the most part people don't believe such a place exists where we park on the street and never lock our cars or houses.

Unfortunately, Clayton is pretty much gone both figuratively and literally.

Even before the flood, Clayton's not the same. I guess it's lost its innocence. But, Clayton and its people have quite an impact on those of us who live there. Most of Clayton's residents either die or move away prior to the flood. The Graves, Sheets, Smiths and Cowlings all pass away. The Milfors, Harrisons, Fries and Garrisons move away. I actually regret that most people will never know Clayton.

Most of all, I find it amusing when someone says, "I'm from a small town. There were only about 10,000 people." The best is when I take my

dog to the veterinarian and she says, "*I studied with a vet outside a little town in Kentucky you probably never heard of called Clayton.*" (The world gets even smaller; the vet is my cousin.)

Big city or small town? For my money (and for sure my parents) I'll take a small town if for nothing more than the safety it provides, loony tunes notwithstanding, but my parents sure are getting loud sometimes when they talk in their room at night.

Since everybody knows what's going on all over town, it's like having an extra set of eyes watching you. At the time, we think it is hell, but looking back, we are actually lucky.