
www.virtualbookworm.com
This
Free
Sample
Courtesy
of
Publishing

Not Far From Town

Also by Brian A. Connolly

Bradley's Christmas Adventure
Wolf Journal

Not Far From Town

Stories from the Upper Allegheny River

By Brian A. Connolly

Virtualbookworm.com Publishing
College Station, Texas

Several of the stories in this collection have appeared in other publications: *Portage Creek* in Indigenous Fiction, Redmond, Washington; *Turtle Point* in Ibis Review, Falls Village, Connecticut; *Lillibridge Creek* in Potato Eyes Magazine, Troy, Maine.

Cover Photograph: Soda Butte Creek, copyright 2006 by Dan and Cindy Hartman. Used by permission. Courtesy of Wildlife Along the Rockies, Silver Gate, Montana.
www.wildlifealongtherockies.homestead.com.

Author Photograph by Heather Jerome

"Not Far From Town" by Brian A. Connolly. ISBN 1-58939-865-3 (softcover).

Library of Congress Control Number: 2006926159

Published 2006 by Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., P. O. Box 9949, College Station, TX 77842, US.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

For
Mike, Mary Ann, Judy, Kathy, Kate,
Chris and Jani

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Kevin Porter, a member of the International Society of Professional Trackers and NYS DEC Certified Search and Rescue Crew Boss from Cato, New York, who taught me about foraging in the wild and about the art of tanning hides. Also, special thanks to R. Edson Porter of Auburn, New York, for his *Kinzua* insights. Thanks to Bob Wiltermood, Port Orchard, Washington, for his expertise in firearms. Thank you to the Potter County Historical Society in Coudersport, Pennsylvania (the town where I was born) for their detailed information and photos of the hamlet of Mina, Pennsylvania. Thank you, as well, to Robert Adam, Fishkill, New York, for his gentle encouragement, and his phonographic memory of '60's music. Thank you to Judy Connolly for her computer wisdom!

Author's Note

The novella *Mina* evolved from the short story *Bear Creek*. Both locations are not far from Port Allegany, Pennsylvania. Most of the stories in this collection happen in real places just upstream or downstream from Port. When I knew that the novella would end in Mina, I decided to check my memory against the facts, whatever they were. What I knew was that back in the '50's my mother used to take my brothers, sisters, and me to this 'ghost town' she called Mina. It was across the Allegheny River between Roulette and Coudersport. She would walk us among the scant ruins of this turn of the century hamlet. What remained of the once busy lumber town were vine covered foundations, partial windowless walls, broken clapboards burnt brown with age, and a few remnant fireplaces made of gray stone. Our imaginations rebuilt the town with the aid of my mother's stories. Just to make sure that what I remembered was somewhat accurate, I contacted the Potter County Historical Society in Coudersport, Pennsylvania. They assured me that all traces of Mina had been washed away during the great flood of 1942, many years before I visited the 'ghost town'. I didn't understand how my memory could be so faulty. As a consolation, the historical society member with whom I spoke, said he'd send me some photographs and an article on Mina from their files. Some of the photographs sent to me were part of a multi-page newspaper article titled *The History of Mina* by Alyce Hoh Connolly, my mother. So the clear details of the Mina in my memory were actually the details of the Mina from my mother's memory. Maybe my story telling springs from the same well. The dilemma was that my story takes place in recent time and ends in a town that no longer exists. I decided as a tribute to her, I would allow the story to end in the 'ghost town' of our imagination. I am sure she would have approved.

Not Far From Town

Stories from the Upper Allegheny River

by

Brian A. Connolly

Table of Contents

Kinzua

Sebastian Baxter was like a character from one of the novels I was studying at Edinboro College. I met him in Garland, a one street town west of the Allegheny National Forest in northern Pennsylvania. It was two a. m. when he stopped to offer me a ride.

"How far ya goin', partner?" he asked.

"Port Allegany," I said.

"Get in then. We'll get you down the road a piece. This is a hell of a place to get stuck in. No women, no booze, no women. Just old farty maids. Makes a man uncomftable just to look at 'em. I can get ya to Ormsby. No women there either, but at least there's a light an' trucks commin' through. You won't be far from home then. Hell, you could walk from there!"

I threw my duffle bag in the back seat and rode shotgun. Sebastian was driving a '54 Ford wagon that must have doubled as a farm vehicle. No hubcaps, rear passenger door tied shut with bailing twine and the car's original sky blue paint was clouded with rust. The hood was sprung, and, even though it wasn't raining, I noticed that he only had a windshield wiper on his side. There was a hole in the muffler causing it to sound like war drums. The car smelled of chickens and hay, and Sebastian smelled of wood smoke. On the

crackling AM radio, Marty Robins was singing about his Mexican girl down in El Paso.

Sebastian was a big man. Not tall, but chunky with a great belly which was covered with a stained, gray flannel shirt and protruded through dingy red suspenders. He wore old blue work pants like the kind the factory workers back home wear. Locks of long, gray hair dangled from under his colorless felt hat. His face was round, red from a life outdoors, shored up with a double chin that was softened by a five-day white stubble. His face was alive and excited as if he were pleased to see me. Even by the dash lights I could see the yellow discoloration of his fingers from years of smoking Luckys. He offered me one. I accepted.

We headed down the narrow macadam road to Route 6, then east toward the lights of Warren. It was a clear, fall night. Stars hung above the dark trees, strings of costume jewelry: bracelets, necklaces, earrings and brooches laid out on black cloth as if they were the real thing.

"The name's Sebastian, Sebastian Baxter of the Ormsby Baxters!" he said.

"Jonathan Cole," I said shaking his hand. My hand was soft; his was hard, callused and dry. A firm grip.

"Where ya hitchin' from?"

"Edinboro. I'm in my second year at the college there," I said.

Sebastian said, "Gonna be a professor, I bet! It's a good thing yer doin'. Book learnin' weren't my strong suit. God knows I had some brave teachers who tried, but it was all water agin stone. I can read and write some, but on the farm there ain't much call fer it. Made it through the eighth grade though! Well, not all the way through. But they's other kinds of learnin'. For example, I know the woods and can read a trail as good as any guide in these here hills. Get my deer and a bear most every year along with a flock of turkeys, grouse and geese!

"And then there's the farm. What a education that's been. But I do all right. Made it to sixty-three and the good Lord hasn't seen fit to drop a boulder on me yet!"

"Sounds like a hard life," I said.

"All life is hard no matter who you are: farmer, professor or president," Sebastian said. "Life is trouble. The trick is to squeeze enough fun out of it to make the rest tolerable. If there's excitement around, I'll go fer it. Never miss a chance! So that way I'm fortified fer bad times like when the old wife died a few years back, and just last week my cow keeled over dead as if she was shot, and the tractor's broke good. What kin ya do? Ya got to keep yer balance. I seen guys go off their nut in bad times. Yellin' at the sky in a rage! Don't do no good. I tried it. So, do they teach that at yer college?"

"What?" I said.

"How to keep yer balance," he said.

"I think they expect you to figure that out on your own."

Sebastian lit another Lucky and said, "Well, you got a good start on it. Standing out here in the middle of the planet at two o'clock in the dark a.m. Gives a man a chance to think about things. And not just 'Am I going to be jumped by a bear?', but like 'Am I doin' the right thing with my life?', 'Do I like who I am?' That sort of stuff. There's somethin' I wanna show you up the road just the other side of Warren. We'll take old 59 to Ormsby. It'll save us time, and I kin show you what real hardship looks like. It'll be part of yer education, professor!"

The lights of Warren were like an island in the middle of a dark sea. Patsy Cline was falling to pieces on the radio. There was an aunt of mine on my father's side who lived here. Still did as far as I knew. I told Sebastian about her, "She has a big house a few blocks off Main Street somewhere, and collects newspapers and magazines, especially The National Geographic. I think she had every issue they published. Her house was so full of stacks and stacks that you could only walk narrow paths from room to room. I always thought she was a little touched, but dad said she had read them all and that they were carefully arranged by year. He said she called it her private library. She had never been anywhere, but she could tell you all about the head hunting tribes of New Guinea or about the rituals of the Inuit people in the Arctic."

"Sounds like my kind a' woman!" Sebastian said. "You see, I'm a collector myself. Mostly busted farm machinery. I got me a steam tractor though, hand built by Foster there in Smethport back in eighteen and ninety-five. I refitted it, and she works slick as lace on a young girl's bottom. Still use it fer spring plowin'. Even had her over to the McKean County Fair last year.

"Also, I collects Indian relics. Got a whole slew of arrowheads, stone axes and such stuff. Seneca mostly, but some is Susquehannock and Huron. Found it all just plowin' my fields. Them Indians was good people until we run 'em off or kilt 'em outright. They knew how to be with the land.

"So, the old aunt is a collector! What say we give her a visit!"

"I think it's a little late, Sebastian, and I'm not exactly sure which house is hers," I said.

"Next time then," he said. "Besides, we got something of our own up ahead."

Sebastian pulled a disk shaped box of Skoal out of his shirt pocket, took a large pinch and packed it behind his lower lip. "Have some?" he mumbled.

“Oh, no thanks," I said.

"Could you take the lid offen that Maxwell can there by yer leg?" he asked.

A putrid smell sprung from the can as I removed the lid. Inside sloshed the inky remains of spent tobacco juice. I held back a gag and placed the open can on the floor hump between us. Sebastian spit out a long, dark string of liquid toward my foot. It arched into the open can.

"Pretty damn good shot, ain't I?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"When yer a growed man," he continued, "you'll learn yerself the pleasures of a good pinch a' tobacca. Nothin' like it!"

"My father's first paying job," I explained, "was cleaning the spittoons at the Butler House in Port. He was twelve."

"He must be a good man with such a good start as that!" Sebastian smiled.

Sebastian settled into driving and thinking. The lights of Warren were absorbed by the dark hills behind us as we headed east on Route 59. The headlights searched the macadam road like luminous antennae, and Woody Guthrie sang on the radio about hoboes riding the rails. I watched the trees and the starry sky and occasionally glimpsed the Allegheny River running dark and cold through the endless mountain shadows. As we moved along the winding road, I remembered something my father used to say: Life isn’t just what happens when you arrive some place. Most of it happens along the way there. So true, I thought. So true.

We rounded a sharp curve and descended into a thickly forested valley. A half dozen deer were standing in the road. Sebastian honked at them and shouted out the window, "Just you wait! Your life's gonna change soon!"

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"You'll see up ahead about a mile or so," he smiled. "Everyone's life here is gonna change. In fact, professor, you an' me might be the very last people to ride this road!"

The first evidence of change came at a roadside rest where several yellow bulldozers and a giant grader were parked. A little way down the road the forest stopped. All the trees were gone. The hillside was barren, all neatly graded as far up as I could see. Fresh earth smells streamed into the car window. Down by the river concrete footings had been poured; the forms were still in place, and re-bars protruded above. Several spotlights attached to cranes illuminated the area. Men with kerosene lanterns stood in small groups on both sides of the water. Small campfires dotted the shoreline with their dancing light.

"What's going on here?" I asked.

"It's the Kinzua Dam they're building. They say it's a flood protection project. Those men over there are guards. They expect trouble. Some people don't think a dam should be built, especially the ones whose land is going to be under a hundred feet of water. You see, this here is reservation land, Indian land. It belongs to Cornplanter's people. They're Seneca. The land was give to them in the 1800's , how did they say, 'as long as the grass growed and the river flows'. Well, the govement got rid of the grass problem by removing it all, just like skinnin' a bear, but the river's still flowin'. They'll stop that soon enough. And these good people are offen their land."

"Judas priest," I said, "look at this place!"

Sebastian said, "Just wait 'til ya see what's up ahead. We're just a spit away from what's left of the village of Kinzua, a Seneca town."

This part of the road was very rough having broken under the weight of heavy equipment: skidders, eighteen-wheelers and such. Ahead was a grove of trees. All the branches had been severed. The dismembered trunks stood like lifeless ghosts, sorrowfully still, dishonored in their death.

Sebastian drove beyond the trees before he pulled over to the side of the road. Up a slight embankment was a ten-foot high wall of black plastic above which shown the bright haze of hidden lights.

"This is what I want you to see. You'll remember tonight! Come on," he said.

We left the car idling and both doors open. Over the low thunder of the muffler, Tennessee Ernie Ford could be heard singing *Sixteen Tons*. Sebastian led me up to the black wall. There were dozens of tear holes scattered along its length where people had cut through to see what was on the other side. Through each hole a crisp shaft of light jabbed the cool darkness. I could hear voices.

"Have yerself a look see," Sebastian said.

I peered through the nearest hole. At first my eye had to adjust to the silver lights. The area inside was glowing with bulbs strung from poles and kerosene lanterns carried by the men inside. There must have been over thirty men working. The eerie thing was that each man was dressed in white coveralls, white gloves and black rubber boots. Each one wore a white hood with netting over the face. The hoods were fastened to the white suits. Strapped to their heads were miner's lights. Some of the men were digging with shovels, others with picks. Still others were carrying long boxes or black bags on stretchers. Mostly I couldn't make out what they were saying, but one man nearest me yelled, "I got me a live one here and there's no goddamn box! Al, get me one of them bags!"

It was as if I had stumbled onto men working on another planet. Without turning away from the scene, I asked Sebastian what they were doing.

"This here's the village burial ground. These men are digging up graves to transplant them to the new burial ground up in New York. Quite a sight isn't it! They wear the suits to keep from getting some disease. One guy told me last week that when the job is done, these guys have to be quarantined for three to six months. But the pay is good! Can't blame a guy for makin' a livin'. I think the only sickness they is likely to get is soul sickness, haunted by what they seen and done, not to mention the Indian spirits followin' 'em around the rest of their days. The tribes here abouts knows how to put on a good spell and there ain't no escaping it.

"Can you imagine how Cornplanter's people feels what with their parents being dug up, their sisters and brothers being dug up, their children and the old ones being hauled out the ground. Why if the gov'ment came to dig up my old wife, rest her soul, I'd sit on her grave with that bear gun a' mine and help them fellas to join her ifn they didn't leave her be!

"See that black ridge up yonder where the stars end? I bet a gang of pissed off Senecas is up there right now crouched in the dark wearin' war paint, armed to the teeth. And I don't blame 'em one goddamn bit! You reads history about the Indian wars a hundred year ago and all the terrible things we did to them so we could have a free land and they could just be lost in their own land, but the same damn thing is still goin' on! The gov'ment makes a decision and everything agin it is just fleas on a dog.

"Professor, what yer lookin' at through that hole is called progress. This here is the real face of progress not some mask the newspapers 'r history books wants ya to see. They's all full a' lies an' cover-ups! They only show you what we build. They forgets to mention all the things we destroyed. The trees, the people, the land, the animals. Makes no difference to them bastards! What matters to them is a hundred miles a' shoreline for swimming an' boating, electric power and control over this here river what's been runnin' its own wild way long since before even the Indian was here.

"I think we better go before I decides to join them Indians on the ridge. I didn't mean to get so riled, but I just don't understand it, I don't understand how people can do what they do to other people. Assholes! That's what they are!"

Sebastian was still mumbling to himself as he ambled down the slope to the car. We drove on in silence into the village of Kinzua.

There were more tree trunks standing armless. Oaks and maples mostly. It was spooky driving through the empty streets. Except for three old, boarded up houses and a stone church, everything else had been bulldozed and carried away.

Sebastian pointed to a vacant corner lot. "There was a combination post office, store, hotel and tavern right there. And over there was a hardware and smith shop. The brothers that run it could fix anything that broke, make up new harness and shoe a horse after they made the shoes. They fixed my bear gun when the damn pin busted.

"The gov'ment will take those last three houses down, but they's some talk of leavin' the church be. After all, the water will be eighty feet deep here inside a year. Bass and muskellunge will be prayin' in it."

The whole town was recreated out of Sebastian's memory. The old people sitting on stoops in the late afternoon sun. Children singing in the schoolhouse. Young women weaving in their living rooms or working in gardens. Men farming the flats along the river.

"You see, professor," Sebastian said, "what the damn gov'ment don't understand is that everythin' I just told you was also bulldozed and carried away. All the feelin's those people had, their own history here all plowed under. Now I ain't Indian, not a drop, but the old wife, she was half Seneca. These was her people. And I knowd them all. Now they's all moved up to New York. Gov'ment says 'we'll gives you a new piece of land and a brand new trailer and all these folks had to do was give up their life. It's just a damn shame is what it is! A damn shame!"

Sebastian didn't talk much after that. He was lost in his own history, brooding about the 'gov'ment'. We moved through the dark mountains along Route 59 passing through Marshburg, Laffayette and Mt. Alton. The radio played broken dream songs.

We arrived at the blinking light in Ormsby just as daylight was beginning to stain the eastern sky. Sebastian pulled over and said, "This is where you get out, professor. My farm's just up toward Cyclone a ways. You'll have the sun to keep you company shortly, and in no time at all them logging trucks'll come through n' give ya a ride. What I'd like ya to do fer me is when you get back to that college of yours, remember what you saw tonight. Just remember."

I shook Sebastian's hand and thanked him for the ride. I promised him I would remember. He pulled out onto the road, his muffler drumming out a warning to the neighboring tribes. Hank William's *I'm So Lonesome I Could Die* trailed Sebastian as he headed north. I stood next to my duffle bag looking down the empty road. The silence was

immense. No ride was in sight. The caution light blinked on and off, on and off, making the yellow crossroads appear and disappear, appear and disappear.