

Memories from a Hewletts Creek Childhood

By Margaret Head Hummel as told to daughter Cissy Shannon Russell



The house I grew up in on Hewletts Creek was built in 1880, and I believe is now one of the oldest houses on the creek. The prevailing winds come from the southwest, which gives our side of the creek a constant cooling breeze. On humid summer Sundays, aunts and uncles and cousins would often come out from town to enjoy those breezes. We did a lot of porch sitting, and still do to this day.

Sometimes, on those long ago Sundays, we'd hear music and singing drifting over from across the creek, and we'd watch as distant figures in white robes were baptized in the water of the creek.

When I was a little girl, back in the 1940s, I and my older brother Billy or my older sister Jane would go down to the pier to catch crabs on a summer day. We'd tie an old chicken neck weighted with an oyster shell to a length of string, and hold one end, letting the other touch the muddy creek bottom. When we felt a gentle tug, we'd ever so carefully and slowly lift the chicken neck up, until a big blue-green crab was revealed hanging onto the bait. Then we'd scoop it up with a net and dump the crab into a bucket filled with many other scabbling crabs.

Up at the house, the crabs were boiled until they were red in a big pot of water. The crabs were dropped in live which always made me sad. After the meat was painstakingly picked out of the shells, Mother would mix the lumps of crab with mayonnaise, lemon juice, a shake or two of Worcestershire sauce, torn pieces of white bread and salt and pepper. Then she'd put this mixture into the cleaned out crab shells, top with buttered crumbs and bake in the oven for about 10 minutes, to make her famous deviled crab. This was a special treat that the family just loved, so we made sure to catch plenty of crabs all summer long.

She'd typically serve the deviled crab for supper or Sunday dinner with stuffed cheese potatoes, a nice tomato aspic or fresh sliced tomatoes, her own homemade yeast rolls and maybe a pie made from blackberries I had picked from the edge of the woods.

I learned to swim in the creek when I was about 8 years old. Mother and her sister Margaret would sit on the pier with their legs in the water and watch us swim. The water was clear green on a rising tide or brown and muddy on a falling tide, so we preferred to swim on a rising tide. Once, right before I learned to swim, I found myself in over my head and started to drown. My brother Billy, who was 16 at the time, ran out and rescued me. My hero!

In the house next door lived my Aunt Margaret and Uncle Hugh and my younger cousins Sandy and Rob. Uncle Hugh loved to tell us kids fascinating and scary stories about pirates. One day, he took us in his boat over to a small island in the mouth of the creek called Tree Island. There was just one tree on this island which had gnarled branches that looked to us like clawed hands. Uncle Hugh told us that this island was just the sort of place on which a pirate like Blackbeard might bury his treasure, and encouraged us to dig around a little bit. Soon, I felt my spade hit something under the sand, and in great excitement we uncovered a small chest. When opened, the chest revealed a sparkling pile of costume jewelry and pennies nestled in pink satin. The boys thought surely we had found Blackbeard's treasure, but I knew otherwise, because the pennies were dated 1941.

On lazy, solitary summer days when I didn't have much to do, I liked to visit a bank of clay behind the bluff beside the creek. I'd dig out some of the reddish brown clay, mix it with creek water, roll it into coils and make "indian bowls." I'd let the bowls dry in the sun for a couple of days and then paint them with the only paints I had--water colors--which, needless to say, tended to make the bowls melt.

Every so often, you will see the sun set at the head of the creek, and at the same time the moon rise at the mouth of the creek. It is a beautiful and soulful conjunction when Hewletts Creek contains the reflections of both the sun and the moon. When you see it like this, it's easy to forget that the waters of this creek are now polluted, and the life beneath the water is curtailed. I hope that someday we can once again swim in that clear green water and enjoy fresh deviled Hewletts Creek crabs.

