



# Work for the Quiet Mountains

In many ways, Newton County seems slotted into a set of contradictions. There is, of course, the rugged terrain and native culture in the county home to Jasper, Ponca and Dogpatch USA. But there are also devotees of Buddhism and an aging population of back-to-the-landers, all of whom have come from far-flung places. Perhaps most surprising of all, however, as a writer with roots at least six-generations deep finds, they all somehow fit together

By Johnny Carrol Sain / Photography by Liz Chrisman



## What I remember most about that day in Tarlton Cemetery is the wind.

It was a ferocious, fanged February wind barreling across the Ozark Plateau, wailing through hills and hollows before finding friends and family of the deceased on an unprotected flat surrounded by pasture. The wind pushed against the six men weaving across the cemetery to avoid the oddly placed headstones and markers common to Ozark graveyards. It seems strange that mountain

folk, people who plant corn guided by a taut string, plant their friends and family so randomly. But of course, many of the Tarlton Cemetery population were buried by manual labor, so perhaps burial spots were determined by ease of digging. Rocky ground is characteristic of the Ozarks, and dropping a 6-foot cedar box into a corresponding hole of proper width and depth requires a bit more deliberation than pushing a kernel of corn through topsoil.

All of my memories from that day are tossed and shaken by the sudden loss of a person whose voice and scent and gait were threads woven into the tapestry of my life. I was only 24. Dad was only 46. His death frayed us all, and the wretched Ozark wind tugged and pulled at the tag ends on that raw winter day. Mom physically unraveled. My unraveling was on the inside. Far from stoic, I stood because Mom couldn't. I stood because that's what sons do at their fathers' funerals.

Before that day, I had always viewed Newton County as "where my dad is from,"

with no real sense of personal connectivity. But on that day—between the wind and the pewter sky, both despite and because of the abrupt change in my life—my roots of belonging surged deeper into the place. An inversion took place, or the torch was passed, or whatever you want to call it, but Newton County became more of me after Dad died.

In the 21 years since, I've immersed myself in that heritage, searching for connections between people and place, for an answer to why my people and I are drawn to the hills. My Newton County roots already ran deep in the Ozark Plateau, at least six generations, with ancestors resting in Newton County cemeteries in Mount Judea, Cowell, Tarlton Flat and small hidden plots scattered throughout the ridges and hollows. My blood is validation here, where many still know me as Johnny Junior, where people I don't recall having ever met can spot me as Devoe's grandson from across the Jasper City Square at the Elk Festival. In the intervening years, I've learned that you don't have to be

from Newton County, literally or through a lineage, in order to love the land and the unique cultures it attracts and fosters.

Best I can tell, my Newton County origins trace back to Mount Judea. The very definition of isolation, Mount Judea sits in the bottom of the drainage area for Big Creek, which meanders through miles of rugged terrain before spilling into the Buffalo River. The locals and those who trace their blood back to this lonesome hollow call it "Judy." It's where Devoe William Sain and Lois Jewell Hefley, my paternal grandparents, met and then married in 1942. In 1950, my grandparents opened Sain's Grocery just up the hollow from Judy on Arkansas Highway 7 between the communities of Lurton and Cowell.

Who-da-Thought-it gift shop is today's incarnation of Sain's Grocery. It sits in a curve with the headwaters of Big Creek just across the highway. The newest building, constructed with concrete blocks in 1963, hasn't changed appreciably since my childhood, other than what was once old living quarters behind the store being converted to more retail space. Woodsmoke still wafts through the cool air of a November afternoon, though the smoke's source is now a wood-burning furnace as opposed to the cast-iron stove that stood center in the store when Grandpa ran things. The same worn, wooden candy rack holds a selection of sweet temptations. A 1950s-era 7-Up cooler still keeps the glass-bottled soft drinks frosty. Hardware and tools are in the back, and various tourist trinkets line shelves in the gift section. There's even Who-da-Thought-it T-shirts. I have two of those. It's a general store, a fast-disappearing, though once-common, species in the rural landscape.

My uncle Dennis owns and runs the store, and he holds my mountain heritage. He shares it generously with stories about his and Dad's dog, Gouger, and how running water was piped into the front yard courtesy of gravity and the spring just uphill from my grandparents' house. When I think of Dennis, I think of sideburns. He's worn sideburns with no beard or mustache since he could grow facial hair, or at least since my earliest memories of him. His hands and fingers and fingernails are shaped like Dad's, and



**Above:** The author visits with his uncle, Dennis Sain. The house, which is just in back of Dennis' Who-da-Thought-it gift shop, was built by Johnny's grandparents and is where Dennis was born.

**Far left:** After his father died 21 years ago and was buried in Tarlton Cemetery, Johnny immersed himself in the heritage of Newton County, to find why generations of his family had connected with the land, and why people who came after them did as well.

my hands are nearly identical. His speech is peppered with peculiar Newton County pronunciations I rarely hear since Dad's death. A "holler" is a valley surrounded by ridges. Nearby Hurricane Creek is pronounced "Herrican." And I'll even catch a "dreckly" every now and then. ("Dreckly" is the Newton County pronunciation of "directly," which means "soon.") Dennis is 66 and has lived and worked nearly his entire life mere feet from the house where he was born. This distinction makes him another fast-disappearing, though once-common species, in the rural landscape. I'm envious of his intimacy with the place.

Dennis is one of the most thoughtful men I know and constantly deliberates on issues in Newton County, where he serves as a justice of the peace, and abroad as well. Our discussions often veer into rural philosophy, like when I ask what he wants Newton County to be in 20 years.

"I want it to be like it was when I was growing up," he says. "We could go where we wanted to go, and we never carried water bottles. We'd never heard of a water bottle. We drank from the springs." When I gently mention the impossibility of this ideal, his thoughts alter, but only a little. "Well, then I don't want it to change any more. It's good like it is right now."

There are still elements held over from Dennis's childhood here—everybody knows everybody, and they all look out for one another. Last deer season, as I visited with Dennis after a hunt, he got a phone call about the strange truck parked across from the store. That was my truck. And there are still ancient elements, scenes and sounds from a time before European eyes viewed the interior highlands, like the primal rutting screams of bugling bull elk in the fog-hazed Buffalo River bottoms of Boxley Valley. There is a lot of old, and there is a lot





of very old. The rugged nature of the land fostered an isolation both from people and from time itself.

The Osage used what is now Newton County only as hunting grounds before they were displaced by the Cherokee, uprooted and moved west from their Southeastern homes. Early Euro-American settlers were hunters and trappers, widely scattered and fiercely independent. But real settlement didn't happen until around 1833, when lines were drawn and the area was first recognized as part of Carroll County. The Newton County borders known today were established in 1842. Those first official Newton County settlers trekked westward from Tennessee and North Carolina — the Sains, the Hefleys, the Tennisons, the Reddells and so many other branches spreading out from Appalachia. These were my people, and Dennis is my direct link to the bloodline. The last member of his nuclear family, Dennis is the earth and stone foundation of my heritage.

According to the 2010 census, only around 8,000 souls live in Newton County. It's lonely country. This was the attraction for some of its more recent residents. "People came here to be free, for a gentler, slower life," says Emma Hickey. Emma owns and operates Emma's Museum of Junk right on the downtown square in Jasper. Jasper is the county seat, and it's home to a Mayberryesque town square, an annual bluegrass festival, some of the finest dining in rural Arkansas and Bradley Park, a park so silly adorable it doesn't seem real. Emma is in her fifth store location, all of which have been on the square in Jasper. It's a cavernous yellow-brick building. Ivy clings to the exterior walls, potted plants line the western alley, and the sidewalk frontage features an ever-changing assortment of knickknacks and relics from

**Top left:** Emma Hickey came to Newton County in 1978—or thereabouts—as an unknowing part of the back-to-the-land movement. Although she's been here for decades, owns a business (Emma's Little Junk Shop), and has her hand solidly on the pulse of the community, because her roots are shallower than many native to the community. She is still considered by many to be an outsider.

days gone by. Inside the store, you can find everything from crucifixes to whiskey shot glasses to smudge sticks to locally made soap. Emma's kind brown eyes, easy smile and youthful zest for life don't quite fit the description for the typically more stoic folks with lineage reaching deep into Newton County, and her accent is a dead giveaway: She's not from around here. It's a designation that's stuck for the nearly 40 years she's lived in Newton County. Emma doesn't enjoy the benefits of kinship in Newton County that I do, though I've never resided here. It's a remnant of Scots-Irish culture, strong on the positives of family ties, that forms the

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foundation of rural America.

Emma is not just an outsider—she is a Northerner from Rhode Island. She came to Newton County in 1978 (she thinks) as an unknowing part of the back-to-the-land movement that saw young adults from all over the nation dispersing to more rural areas in search of something simple, something real and, at the risk of puncturing romantic notions about the group, something economical. Of course, it was more than just cheap land, though, and many back-to-the-landers still live in Newton County. Some are organic farmers. Some have become vocal activists and advocates for the natural wonders that give Newton County its distinctive flavor. Emma came to Arkansas after a friend had already moved to Newton County and had sung the glories of fresh air, tall trees and clean water.

"My friend said to me, 'Oh Emma, you've got to come out here and see this. It's wonderful,'" says Emma, with the dreamy tone of someone

who had found an exclusive path to Nirvana right here among the shagbark hickories and trilling whip-poor-wills. But aesthetics aside, practicality made the decision easy. "Yeah," she says, "the land was cheap."

Inexpensive, and often free, real estate is likely what brought my folks to Newton County as well. Many settlers came here when veterans of the War of 1812 were offered free deeds to land west of the Mississippi River. Many others of those 1800s Ozark settlers had to move after someone laid claim to their land they'd forgotten to file a claim for themselves. There was also the appeal of privacy. Arkansas was the wild, wild West back then. Some

Appalachian moonshiners found that fighting the government over making whiskey was much harder than simply packing up and moving out of the government's reach. The special thing about this place was often its backwoods lack of market value.

Emma's first home in Arkansas was a tepee, then an enormous funky Army tent, then "a plastic house." Eventually she and her husband built a one-room wooden house, but that's when her husband left her and the children. Because raising a few sheep wouldn't buy clothes for the kids and she didn't believe in day care, Emma decided to start a business in the most rural county of one of the most rural states in the Union—frontier spirit and hillbilly grit in its 1980s embodiment.

Her business started off as Emma's Little Junk Shop, a consignment store with nothing to sell. Daily, she hitchhiked into Jasper with her kids in hopes that some business would materialize in the town of less than 400 people. Finally, a man brought in an old table to sell

on consignment, and then a friend gave her a box of books to sell.

"That's all I had for a long while," says Emma. "So then somebody came in and bought a book for 2 bucks." And the rest, as they say, is history.

Besides owning a local landmark and tourist must-stop, Emma has a solid pulse on the goings-on in Newton County. She knows Uncle Dennis: "Oh yes, I like that man," she says. "He's a good man." But weirdly, though she's resided here almost as long as I've been alive, even I consider her an outsider. Those Scots-Irish attitudes are tenacious. I ask if she would call herself a hippie. "No," she says. "I hate to label. And what is a hippie?"

When the back-to-the-land-movement people came to Newton County, they put a lot of folks on edge and were often labeled "hippies." But it turns out that the new-timer "hippies" had a lot in common with the longtimers. I asked Emma about the friction and the similarities.

"They got scared when people started to move in," says Emma. "They didn't want it to change, and they still don't, and I love that. And I don't," says Emma. "You know, I'll drink a beer after I Weed-eat all day, but I'm going to fight to keep booze out of this town because I don't want to change this place. You can get booze right over there in Boone County now. But, you know, we don't have a Walmart. We don't have a red light. We don't have alcohol. That's something. That keeps Newton County just perfect."

I tend to align with a lot of back-to-the-landers' ideology. They are my ancestors in spirit. It's their fire, their passion to preserve the wild and uncivilized Newton County that inspires me when my own flame is barely flickering. They came here looking for simplicity and a connection to place, and now they are among the most tenacious defenders of these qualities. I came here for the same reasons after Dad's death. I fight for the same causes.

This simplicity and a connection to place are also the reasons that in 2007, Newton

County, Arkansas, was chosen over places such as Louisiana bayou country and the Pacific Northwest as the site for a Buddhist retreat. A combination of the logistical and spiritual was behind the decision, says Kim Correte. Kim is a nurse and practicing Buddhist who lives on land purchased as part of the retreat. Originally from rural New Hampshire, then residing in Juneau, Alaska, for 30 years, she came to Newton County six years ago.

Kim meets me at the “red house,” the first structure visible after crossing a low-water bridge leading into the retreat. She is wearing a green, Hawaiian-print summer dress. Her John Deere cowboy boots crunch softly on the gravel, and multicolored prayer flags flutter in a gentle, soothing Ozark breeze as we stroll toward the temple. John Deere boots and Buddhist prayer flags are a combination I never expected to see in a lifetime of living in Arkansas. But the Katog Choling Mountain Retreat Center, often shortened to Katog Rit’hröd, sits in a verdant hollow at the dead end of a long dirt track that features a roadside pair of kissing trees, and is headed with a sign proclaiming it the path “beyond reality.”

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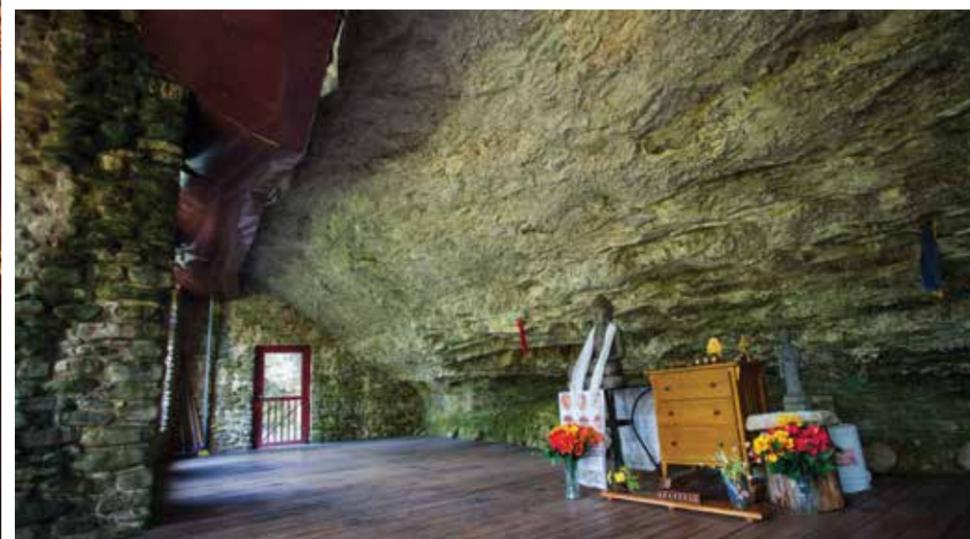
I asked Kim about the transition to rural Arkansas. “I expected, probably because of my Northern upbringing, that it would be harder than it was,” says Kim. “But I went to work in the clinic in Jasper in 2011, and I got to know people in a good way, and I actually found that it was pretty easy.” Kim also discovered many common threads and a deep affection for her co-workers and patients at the clinic. “We’re really not that different. When you get right down to it, rural people are rural people. I know our religious beliefs are different, but it’s less different than you think.”

The retreat’s name is laden with literality. “Katog” is the name of teacher Khentru Rinpoche’s Buddhist lineage, and “Rit’hröd Ri” is translated to “mountain retreat center.” Mountains exude the essence of stability, and that holds special appeal for Tibetan Buddhists. “They like elevation, and although it’s not super high, Newton County is pretty high,” says Kim.

Khentru Rinpoche grew a large following during his 14 years in the U.S. And though he travels extensively, it became evident that it would be good to have a primary place of residence. Khentru, a solidly built and soft-spoken man who looks much younger than his 51 years, explains through his interpreter, Paloma Landry, how a piece of land outside Parthenon became that primary place.

“There are certain characteristics I looked for in land that are very important—peaceful, felt joyful, beautiful,” says Khentru. “In the Buddhist text, there is a [specific] text that explains the best characteristics of land to have for a retreat center. It talks about the directions, water, trees, rocks. I was looking for that. I knew what I wanted, but I didn’t know where.”

There were logistical requirements as well. Not too close to an airport, secluded, inexpensive without the hassle of excessive zoning laws. Khentru tasked two students with finding the *(continued on page 94)*



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perfect place. They traveled up from Louisiana, up through Little Rock and landed in Jasper, where they visited a local real estate office. Serendipitously, while they were in the office, a local property owner walked in and asked if they were looking for land. “So they got in the truck and drove out here,” says Paloma. Khentru could not have been more pleased with the purchase.

“When I came, it was exactly like I wanted,” says Khentru. “I could never get better than this. And also, it was affordable.” The literally text-book-perfect aesthetics were sublime. “The shape [of the land] and the trees and the shape of the trees had very good, what we call, auspicious signs, very positive shape, just like in the text,” says Khentru.

I ask Khentru about how he and the Buddhist community have been received in what is an overwhelmingly white and Protestant region of the country. “Everyone has been very nice and very friendly. Very welcoming,” says Khentru. “And I’ve found that people in Arkansas are very friendly.” Some of the locals gifted a large Kuan Yin statue to the retreat, and this statue now sits in a corner of the old barn temple. Another local woman painted a picture of White Tara, a female Buddha, that resides in the old barn temple as well. “We couldn’t figure out how she would know who Tara was,” says Paloma.

Khentru, who understands and speaks quite a bit of English without an interpreter, says that life in the Arkansas Ozarks is appealing but does have drawbacks. “It’s very special here, only ticks and chiggers.” But Khentru says Newton County does have the least amount of mosquitoes. “California and Oregon, Alaska, Louisiana, Hawaii and Miami—everywhere mosquitoes,” says Khentru. “Not so bad here.”

Stepping inside the old barn temple on the grounds is like stepping inside a kaleidoscope. Vibrant hues and metallic statues mesh

surprisingly well with the cedar posts supporting the structure. In contrast, the cave temple, built around a limestone overhang, is breathtaking in its austerity. The floor is made of cypress, chosen for its inherent resistance to water rot. But the cypress is tested here. Karst, the geology behind what makes the Ozarks the Ozarks and, ultimately, the reason why diverse, yet similar, people from across a spectrum of cultures are here, is on display in the cave. Precipitation falls on the hill, which forms the roof of the cave, and trickles down through crevices and cracks of the water-soluble minerals that make up the mountains and, ultimately, into the cave temple. Jack Kerouac, the sometimes-Buddhist Beat poet, wrote about his view of a mountain stream that “it was the work of the quiet mountains, this torrent of purity at my feet.” But Jack had it beautifully backward. It’s water that does work. And water is always on the move here, crafting and forming the land with a subtle gnawing.

My own river of religion has meandered through the years since Dad’s death. Putting a label on what I believe nowadays has proven challenging, but I’ve found myself falling back on the wisdom of many Buddhist teachings in a search for internal peace. I don’t view Buddhism as spiritual practice, but rather as a philosophy. As one of the students at Katog Rit’hröd says, “Use Buddhism to be a better whatever you are.” The Buddhists are my philosophical ideal. They are water in Newton County, both a placid pool of reflection and a subtle force in the current culture.

Dad and I were two people with just enough similarities to clash, but not enough differences to truly understand each other. In the years since his death, the search for a connection to him has always been an underlying theme when I visit the Ozarks. But as I’ve searched, I’ve discovered that my connection to Newton County and its character runs deeper than bloodlines. I’ve never felt more at home anywhere than I do in Newton County today. It’s because of its people who, whether they run six generations deep in the county or moved here from across the continent only a few years ago, live the qualities they cherish. They are my people now more than ever.

It was the work of the quiet mountains, this person that I am. **AL**

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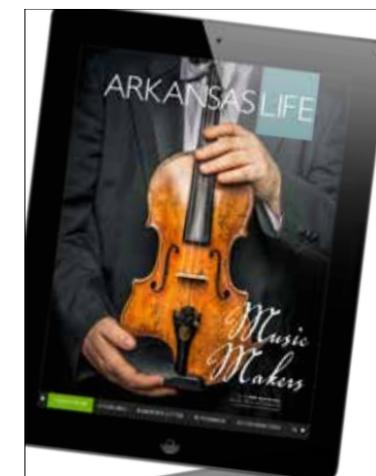
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