

Carl Albert “Junie” Sensabaugh
Kerrs Creek
By Sarah Clayton

Carl Albert Sensabaugh Jr, 90, has lived on Kerrs Creek all his life and can honestly say, “I don’t know much about House Mountain.” Junie, as he’s known, is blind. “The doctor put too strong a medicine in my eyes when I was born,” says Junie without an ounce of self-pity.

His sister, Catherine Nicely, the last with Junie of the five children of Carl and Katrina Sensabaugh, and the mother of two grown daughters, one of whom, Octavia, was in school with me, comes to his house every day since their mother died in 2002. Catherine stays till one o’clock in the afternoon, then comes back four hours later to help with the evening activities.

“It was a new medicine,” she says. “They were just starting to give it to babies. They mixed it in a teaspoon and got it too strong.”

Junie could see vague shapes but not much farther than about five feet in front of him until he was 24, when even that went dark.

“I know the mountain is out there,” says Junie, a good-looking man with a fine head of hair. Bob Webb, from Buck’s Barbershop downtown used to come out to cut Junie’s hair “out of the goodness of his heart,” and still comes, though it’s from his retirement home 50 miles away in Roanoke. “I’ve got a vague idea of what the mountain looks like. I hear people talking about two peaks – the big peak and the little peak. The saddle in the middle. But I’ve never seen it.”

“You see,” he says, I was away from home as a kid. Nine months of the year. Starting when I was six. I went to school in Staunton for the deaf and blind. So I didn’t grow up even knowing there was a mountain out there.”

“I’d come home one weekend a month, for Christmas break, and in the summer. I traveled back and forth to school on the Greyhound Bus. Being away from

home was tough. I 'speck I was hurting. I liked being at home. I'm a homebody. School was a good thing to be away from. But I did get used to it. I had a friend come home with me once in a while but he's passed now. I come home for good when I turned 20. I graduated. I'd learned to cane chairs."

"I remember you caning chairs for mother," I say. "And for me when I came back to live in the county. Why'd you stop?"

"I had to give it up when I had the stroke. 2002. Didn't have no choice. See that hand, don't you?" He extends a curled left hand. "Yeah, well, I can't straighten it. My left side's the same way. Haven't got no feeling in it."

I met Junie when I was 9, and came to live at the Madison Dunlap house about a mile up the creek. Mother bought milk, eggs, and the tomato and pepper plants for her vegetable garden from the Sensabaughs. The milk came in gallon glass jars that once held mayonnaise or pickles. Even ketchup. Mrs. Sensabaugh did the milking; Junie fed the cows. A gallon of skimmed milk cost 60 cents. Whole milk was more, \$1.25, I think, but the cream would rise to the top like a band of melted ice cream. If we could get to it before Mother shook it up, it transformed a bowl of cereal into something worthy of the gods.

When Mother and I visited, Junie was always there – quiet, dignified, smiling – mostly coming and going from the chicken house where he looked after 1800 fowl, selling the eggs to Washington and Lee; people, like us, stopping by the house; and others who would go to the Stonewall Jackson graveyard in town where Junie's father, Carl Sr., was manager. If people couldn't make it to the graveyard, Mr. Sensabaugh delivered after work.

"I was raising chickens before I finished high school," says Junie. "Was something I thought I could do. Dad's father kept layers for a long time. I figured if that

old man could do it, I could too. Dick (Junie's brother and Phyllis' father-in-law), Dad and I made the coop. Finished the first part in '57 and I speck we started selling eggs 'bout then too. At the time I had White Leggings. They eat less and lay more but they lay white eggs. People wanted brown eggs. We generally packed a hundred dozen a day. I worked 18, 20 hours at a time. Momma would put the eggs through the light."

"The light?"

"Yes, you run 'em over a special light that can see right through the shells; you can catch which ones is cracked and which ones have blood in them," explains Junie.

"Blood in them?" I say.

"The bloody spots are where a chicken done been scared. Or they fly into something. Laying eggs is kind of a seasonal thing. As the chickens get older – a year, or year and a half – they slow up and the eggshell's not as strong as it was. Time to put them in the deep freeze. Roosters live the longest but get tough. Have to cook 'em longer. We didn't keep any roosters. I had to give it all up in 1990. My chickens needed to be replaced and people weren't eating so many eggs back then so I just quit." He pauses and stares off...into what. What does a blind person see in their mind? "I missed seeing the people," he says quietly.

I didn't even know Junie was blind when I first met him and not for a long time after. He walked around the house and farm as if he knew exactly where he was going. And, of course, he did. When he talked, he looked you in the eye.

"I've just never let it bother me," he says. "When you come up with it, you just don't think about it. When I lost the last bit of my eyesight, I just kept on doing what I was doing. I knew where I was. Oh course, if someone left something out of place, I'd hit it. I had several accidents."

"He got lost in the snow once," says Catherine.

Junie laughs. He really is a good looking man –my mother always thought so – and I'd guess his age at 75. "I went out to the chair shop and worked on caning for probably three hours or more. Come out and all the paths were covered with snow. I walked enough to be at the back steps, but they weren't there. I had to stop. Didn't know where I was. But it wasn't no use being afraid. Wasn't nothing you could do about it. Then I heard the sound of the furnace come on and the wind chimes on the building out here. Once I heard that, I knew where I was. I'd gone too far. I was out there near the picnic table instead of being by the steps. After I heard the furnace, I knew exactly where I was."

In the spring, Junie helped his mother with the plantings. Under glass, they started vegetables early to sell later for gardens—broccoli, tomatoes, lettuce, peppers.

"I couldn't set out the plants or seed or anything like that," says Junie, "but I could take care of the odd bits. I'd sift the dirt and clean out the beds. There was always something to be done." And I remember his tomato stakes—beautiful, sturdy things made out of a round of woven wire fencing. Put the flimsy frames they sold down at the Farmers' Coop to shame.

I'd come with mother to pick up the milk and eggs. Junie's mother, Katrina, was always in the kitchen and often barely visible through the steam of canning. Vats of green beans being blanched. Huge tubs of water heating the jars full of tomatoes or beans, to form a vacuum when the jars were removed and cooled. It was a hot process at the hottest time of the year and air-conditioning was opening another window at that time in country homes. Mrs. Sensabaugh, her gray hair in a bun, her coke-bottle-lens glasses steamed up, her pinafore splashed red with tomatoes, would invite my mother to sit down at the kitchen table covered in canning paraphernalia, and the two of them would visit, each having great regard for the other. Mrs. Sensabaugh knew my mother worked hard and working hard wins respect in the country. And mother felt the same about Mrs. Sensabaugh.

The last time I saw Mrs. Sensabaugh, my mother was dead and Mrs. Sensabaugh was 90 and soon to die. We sat in the same room I'm sitting in with Junie. Tiny Katrina Sensabaugh, one of the hardest working women I've ever known, was weaving yarn through a cross-shaped base. When I came to leave, she gave it to me; it hangs on my tree every Christmas.

Ek Carter, a man whose name is almost synonymous with House Mountain as he owned most of it at one time or another, used to live behind the Sensabaughs back in the 30s.

"He was a nut," says Junie with a laugh. "Half-cracked. When he got about half drunk, he'd fight with his daddy-in-law. They were both drunk. Momma delivered the twins – Robert and Donald. She wasn't no mid-wife but she was up there when they were born and helped deliver them. Only time she delivered a baby. She could do anything."

"You had a lady friend at one time, didn't you, Junie?" I ask.

"Her dad worked for our family before he was married," says Junie. "Run the saw mill and thrashing machine. I knew her and the family from way back. Dated her 18 years. She got tired of me, I reckon. It was the stroke."

The Sensabaugh's house, a classic white farmhouse with front porch and swing, sits under its maple tree, clothes line off to one side, the old chicken coop, silent and still, gathering weeds, off the other and a utility shed right behind, sits no more than 20 feet from the creek. The land coming up to the edge of the rocky, rollicking creek is flat as Iowa, the alluvial plain, which, when I was a girl, was farmed into perfection. Corn, clover, and the market garden vegetables, all laid out in perfect rows, weedless as the wind, though the farm has witnessed and survived most of the worst floods in Kerr's Creek's history.

“The flood of 1950,” says Catherine, “came up a foot in the house. Washed away all our out buildings and everything. We were in this house when it happened. I was 20, 21. Daddy got Junie and Hunter in the car. He’d just got a new car. Got halfway out to the main road and water pulled the motor out. How they got back to the house, I don’t know. Every time it rained after that, momma wouldn’t take her clothes off at night to go to bed. She got so nervous.”

“The ‘69 flood we got water in the basement. Come up to the third step out back,” says Junie.

“1995 it come in the yard and up to the first step,” says Catherine. “Momma would get so worried. Sick to her stomach. But you couldn’t get her to move.”

“I always liked the Kerrs Creek area,” says Junie. “We got good neighbors. We’ve had some great people. The big white house up yonder on the other side of the road. Jim Laird lived there (Dr. Williamson, a vet, and his family lived there when I was a child). He farmed and raised cattle. He was a good neighbor. Died of a heart attack.”

Laird is one of the oldest names associated with the Kerrs Creek Community but they’ve come and gone. No more Laird’s live in the county.

“You remember Beatty’s Mill, Sarah?” asks Junie. “Over near Whistle Creek.”

“No, I only remember Miller’s Mill.”

“I member being in Beatty’s when it was operating. The water wheel. I remember the floor vibrating when the wheel turned.”

Since his stroke, Junie’s been confined to a wheelchair.

“Do you listen to book tapes or anything, Junie?” I ask.

“No,” he says. “I listen to the radio from time to time.”

Remembering this vital, intelligent man working, always working either with his chickens, in the garden or caning chairs, and now seeing him so thoroughly dependent, I ask, “Do you get bored, Junie.”

He seems to intuit my line of thinking. "Sarah," he says, his deep voice melodious with Rockbridge County accent. "I'm not one of those people. Ain't no way I'd ever do away with myself. I'd probably do more harm than good." We laugh.

"Well, you have a wonderful sister, Junie."

His voice quietens. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for her. She's my only sister."

Junie doesn't sleep so well. "I never did. From way back," he says. I reckon when the chickens were outside before we put them in for laying, I worried about something getting 'em. A polecat or an owl or something or other. I slept with one ear open. I guess that's what kept me awake. Listening for the chickens."

I ask him if he ever gets out.

"Not much," he says. "But it don't bother me being here. I like where I'm at. Me being away from home so much when I was little, makes me appreciate home. I've never lost that. Just glad I'm here."