Crossroads: Change in Tri-state Appalachia, Georgia

As told by Fannin County High School Media Department Students
Blue Ridge, Georgia

Introduction:

Fannin County High School Media Department students in Blue Ridge, Georgia, worked in collaboration with the Blue Ridge Mountains Arts Association to produce this thoughtful documentary, inspired by the exhibition *Crossroads: Change in Rural America*. A few days after their final interview, COVID-19 restrictions caused a shutdown of the community and the schools. Students continued post-production of their video using video calls to stay connected and driving to each other's homes to drop off equipment. Inspired by the world pandemic, at the end of their video youth discussed how COVID-19 became a crossroads for their community.

Story Narrative:

Background Music (00:00)

Ryan Petersen (00:30): There are numerous towns in our area. Some large, some small. Most of which weren't always the way they are now. We know these places as home. The tri-state Appalachia region, the area where Georgia meets north Carolina and Tennessee.

Rachel Gray (00:50): I can literally feel my blood pressure kind of decreasing from, you know, the traffic, just the busyness in the Atlanta area. And coming back home is kind of, just a secure feeling, a sanctuary for me.

Melissa Mercier Lillard (01:04): You can feel a part of the community. You don't get lost. You feel like you can make a difference in those around you.

Ryan Petersen (01:12): Often rural communities are thought of for their agricultural endeavors, but though it is part of the story here, agriculture is just a small facet of our tri-state Appalachia region. The rise or fall of those industries that help to shape the area's economics, and how their boom or declined affected it's people, sometimes by surprise, is the crossroad story. Each path taken has had a cause and effect on the people of the region, some positively and some negatively.

Billy Wayne Chastain (01:42): My name is Billy Wayne Chastain. I was raised in McCaysville, Georgia. I worked 42 years for the mining company. And I started in the mines when I was 23 years old.

Ryan Petersen (01:55): Because the concept of crossroads is not just a physical meeting point between two pathways, it's evolution. It's the intersection of ideals, ways of living,

and thriving. Crossroads have occurred here multiple times over the past two centuries. And they are guaranteed to happen again.

Billy Wayne Chastain (02:18): A prospector by the name of Landish, came into this area into the basin area, in the area of Ducktown, Tennessee. And I believe the Creek, he was panning was called Potato Creek. He had some shiny pieces of metal in the bottom of his pan and he thought he'd discovered gold. But when he found out it wasn't gold, he was disappointed. It turned out to be iron pyrite. And that was really a great economical find, in the beginning of a great economical age for the Copper Basin area.

Sarah Mickens (02:58): My name is Sarah Mickens, and I'm the executive director at the Ducktown Basin Museum. Lots of jobs, there was definitely, within the mining, that definitely supplied several years of jobs for everyone around because that's, everyone would come to the basin to look for work.

Billy Wayne Chastain (03:18): Once the ore was discovered, then they began to come in here and do mining. And they came by the thousands, thousands of people that eventually moved here to work.

Ryan Petersen (03:31): The smelting of copper resulted in a chemical byproduct that was also captured and sold, sulfuric acid.

Billy Wayne Chastain (03:38): Once you started smelting, there was great smoke came out. Once you started burning the, or roasting the iron war, I mean, it's great fire and great smoke. They were going out cutting the trees, bringing it in burning, and the smoke from the ore would kill the vegetation through the process that smoke and other additives that created acid, sulfuric acid.

Ryan Petersen (04:05): But the result of this manufacturing process created an acid rain that left the area barren of trees and vegetation, like an alien landscape.

Billy Wayne Chastain (04:14): Mines ran good. There was always plenty of ore. There is still plenty of ore, 65 cents a pound, as long as it was that much, the company made money. Then the copper price that went below that. So, the company slowly shut down.

Ryan Petersen (04:36): After more than 130 years of mining copper, in 1987, the last of the mines in the copper basin closed.

Billy Wayne Chastain (04:44): Shortly after the mines closed, we had almost what you'd say, a catastrophic event happened in McCaysville and copper field. It was a flood. Well, you could see that this was a crossroads for these, there was no longer a company. We'd had this flood. So, it was a pretty bad time.

Sarah Mickens (05:09): There's still a lot of hurt from the company closing, I believe. It literally looks like they left work one day and decided to not come back, because there's still some clothes hanging in the change house that we have there at Burra Burra.

Billy Wayne Chastain (05:25): I went to work there when I was 23. And I'll tell you what, that was the best experience of my working. It's the only job I ever really had, I had several jobs, but when I went there, it was, you found a comradery in the people that work there.

Sarah Mickens (05:45): When the mines did close, there was a lot of closures to all of the businesses. There was a dress shop, there was a furniture shop, there was several car dealerships at one point in time in Copperhill. When everything closed, everything else closed with it.

Ryan Petersen (06:03): Around the same time the mining industry shut down, the textile industry did the same throughout the Southeast. And that too impacted the area.

Ryan Petersen (06:17): Agriculture has been a strong driving force in the region since the 19th century. Mercier Orchards, a prime example, is a family run business since 1943.

Tim Mercier (06:28): My name is Tim Mercier. I'm the second generation of Mercier Orchards.

Melissa Mercier Lillard (06:34): I'm Melissa Mercier Lillard. And I'm the third generation.
Tim Mercier (06:37): The orchard was originally started in 1925, by Dr. [inaudible 00:06:43]. Who actually was the local pharmacist in Blue Ridge. And he started the orchard in 1943. My dad came here as the county agricultural [inaudible 00:06:56]. And he bought the orchard in 1943. It was about 25 or 30 acres of real old trees. Then we started developing the orchard from that period on, from the forties and fifties and sixties and up to what we're doing today. So, we've been, our family has been part of this for 77 years. We didn't have a big tourist based industry. We didn't have a, well we had a small roadside market. It was a very small part of our business.

Melissa Mercier Lillard (07:35): It probably was happening around the end of the nineties, middle of the nineties. We were at a crossroads and we had to make a decision as a family, what we were going to do with our business. Where did we want it to go? What did we want to be for the future?

Tim Mercier (07:52): Tourism started about that time and allowed us to change the way we produced our products and sold our products. Today, we sell maybe 90% of what we grow here on the farm, and we employ about 150 full-time employees.

Ryan Petersen (08:12): So, what's the best-selling item at Merciers?

Tim Mercier (08:15): Mud pies, by far. You might think of us as an apple house, but believe it or not, our bakery products that we produce and sell are more dollar sales than our fruit that we grow.

Melissa Mercier Lillard (08:30): A busy day for us in October is like controlled chaos. We probably see, what do you think? How many thousands of people a day?

Tim Mercier (08:40): On a busy Saturday, eight to ten thousand people.

Melissa Mercier Lillard (08:44): Easily, easily, easily selling over a million pies a year.
Ryan Petersen (08:50): That's a lot of fried pies. Even while big industries encroach on a local way of life, the culture of a small town and a family have managed to survive and even thrive.

Melissa Mercier Lillard (09:01): And being in a small community, it's good to be a family and have kids and raise them. You can really get to know your neighbors and your community and make a difference.

Ryan Petersen (09:11): With the emergence of tourism real estate in the region, boomed. Mountain cabin rentals literally became a cottage industry, providing a place for tourists to stay. All happening in a surprisingly short period of time.

Dick Hillman (09:24): I mean, remembering now 20 or 30 years ago, there wasn't a whole lot going on up here. And they were looking for answers as to how to stimulate their economy.

Wilds Pierce (09:39): I'm Wilds Pierce.

Dick Hillman (09:41): And I'm Dick Hillman. And we are the founders of the Blue Ridge Scenic Railway.

Ryan Petersen (09:46): Development of the Blue Ridge Scenic Railroad began in 1997 and quickly evolved a sleepy little town into a thriving small city, full of and culture.

Wilds Pierce (09:57): I was contacted by a gentleman that was on the, they called it the Blue Ridge Mountain Preservation Society. So, they said, is it possible that you could help us put together a scenic railroad?

Dick Hillman (10:13): Our very first weekend passenger trip, with paying customers, was May 30th, 1998.

Ryan Petersen (10:21): That first year the Blue Ridge Scenic Railroad projected it would need 25,000 passengers to survive.

Wilds Pierce (10:27): We exceeded 25,000 passengers in every year, except the first, okay. The last nine years until we sold railroad in 2015, we exceeded 50,000.

Rachel Gray (10:43): Rachel Gray, general manager of Blue Ridge Scenic Railway. 89,000 passengers we had last year, ride the train, 2019. That's a lot of people in downtown Blue Ridge, our regular train ride, which is an hour from here, from Blue Ridge down to Vacasa, Georgia, Copper hill, Tennessee.

New Speaker (10:59): Within that two-hour span, they're seeing our little town and getting all of the warm, small-town feelings. And they're wanting to come back.

Ryan Petersen (11:10): That warm small-town feeling has been one of the driving forces in the area's tourism success.

Billy Wayne Chastain (11:16): The big industry is tourism. And the train that comes from Blue Ridge to McCaysville, it's amazing.

Rachel Gray (11:27): The top three destinations is Merceirs, Blue Ridge Scenic Railway and downtown Blue Ridge.

Billy Wayne Chastain (11:34): But now, when you go to town and the train is down there, it looks like the heyday when Copperhill, McCaysville was big time, people are on every street, they're on every corner.

Wilds Pierce (11:49): But we're just proud of having been involved. I mean, it was really- [crosstalk 00:11:56].

Dick Hillman (11:55): It was a labor of love. [crosstalk 00:11:56]

Wilds Pierce (11:56): It really was.

Sarah Mickens (11:58): We see the pride that the miners had, and we want to bring that pride back to our little town. And we're trying.

Dick Hillman (12:07): We can say that the railroad certainly is a real economic generator here in, not just Blue Ridge, but Fannin County and North Georgia. Because it brings a lot of people up here and that's not going to stop anytime soon.

Ryan Petersen (12:26): Or so we all thought, which is how crossroads sometimes happen, when we always expect it. In March 2020, just as the students of Fannin County High School were in production on this documentary, the coronavirus pandemic came upon us and what we considered normal, changed again. The schools closed, first for a few weeks, and then until the end of the school year.

Ryan Petersen (12:48): This new unexpected global crossroads event quickly changed everyone's lives. Adding uncertainty to the future. Businesses shuttered, and many area restaurants closed, and then reopened, all now practicing social distancing and health safety measures. People were furloughed and some lost their jobs permanently. Our lives were put on pause. But here's the thing about crossroads, you can always find solace by observing what's happened in the past. Because we have been here before, after all, history does tend to repeat itself sometimes. Life will return to normal, but it will be a new normal, as life slowly returns to what it was like before the global pandemic. Tourism, that has become the driving force for the area, will return. It's those who recognize these reoccurring crossroads as an opportunity that tend to benefit from the new normal. When we reflect on our earlier crossroad events and analyze the change we are living in today, we become aware of what future crossroads might bring. Allowing our community to shape its destiny.

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