

New Nonfiction from Andrew Clark: A Church For All

On a spring day in 1984 my grandfather, Leonard Clark, whom we all called Papaw, gathered his children, grandchildren, and friends around a little building on a patch of land near the French Broad River outside of Asheville, North Carolina – a place formerly known as the Snake Farm – to dedicate a tiny church he called the Little Brookside Chapel. A preacher, one of Papaw's drinking buddy's sons, said a few words at the dedication; Papaw said he was "one of the good ones." The Little Brookside Chapel was a small structure with white painted wood siding, narrow windows, and two rows of tiny pews inside that could seat about twelve people. At thirteen years of age, I didn't want to spend my Saturday at a church dedication, and beyond that, I couldn't understand why Papaw wanted to build a church in the first place.

Growing up in Barnardsville, North Carolina, and later settling in Woodfin, Papaw was a master of many trades. He served in the Marine Corps., worked as a baker, served as a policemen for the City of Asheville, worked as a prison corrections officer, established his own hydraulics sales and repair business, and opened a convenience store, where on multiple occasions I saw him give groceries to poor folk who came in the store with children hugging their legs. Papaw was a Mason, a real estate investor, a landlord, a city Alderman and even a songwriter, penning and recording a Christmas song called "[Happy Magic Christmas](#)" that is in the Rockabilly Hall of Fame. None of this explained why he was building a church; Papaw never went to church. He didn't even like church.



To say Papaw had a complicated relationship with religion is a serious understatement. When my sister, who had married a preacher, had problems in her marriage, my grandfather reminded her that he had warned her against the union, that she had been a “damned fool” to marry a “sorry preacher,” and that she would have been better off picking up a fella from a bar. He often mocked how divorced people took up religion after their marriages failed. My parents, having divorced when I was 3, were both active in their churches and Papaw said they’d gone “plum church crazy.” He would talk about how one could find God out in nature or in almost any place on earth, *except* a church. At the same time, he would talk about how Jesus had blessed him over and over in his life.

You see, papaw didn't dislike Christ. He disliked Christians. Maybe not all of them, but damn near most. He was an expert at finding and pointing out hypocrisy on the part of men of the cloth, or people in local congregations who were in church on Sunday morning, but anything but Christ-like Monday through Saturday. Papaw hated hypocrisy. He would say, "I might be a real son of a bitch, but at least I'm honest." Once when a televangelist was exposed on the news for having an affair, Papaw jumped up from his seat and yelled with delight at the television.

So where did Papaw get the idea to build a church? In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, my grandfather took many vacations to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s, along the seemingly endless stretch of highway toward Myrtle Beach, my grandfather stumbled upon a tiny church. The church was in Conway, South Carolina, where it still stands – it is known as The Traveler's Chapel. Built in 1972, the church is one of the smallest in the United States. With narrow pews that will seat 12 people, the church is always open, with a big guestbook placed by the door for folks to sign. So inspired was Papaw by the little Traveler's Chapel, that he decided a few years later to build a similar church on land he owned on New Stock Road near Weaverville. Because the site he chose had a small stream beside it, he named the church the Little Brookside Chapel. Like the Traveler's Chapel, Papaw put a white picket fence out front.

Of all his accomplishments, building the Little Brookside Chapel gave Papaw the most pride. He would often talk to me about the church, and how he built it for sinners. "Drunks and whores" are welcome to the church, he'd say, and "no one can judge them or look down their long noses at them." He was proud they could come to the church anytime they wanted, as the church was open 24 hours a day. The lights inside and outside of the church were always on, and my grandmother, Christina Clark, decorated the church with a nativity scene

each Christmas. Papaw would say, "There won't be no fighting in my church, 'cause there ain't no preachers."

To understand the man and his animosity toward church, it is necessary to go back. Way back. Papaw grew up in the middle of the Great Depression and he grew up poor. So poor that the one room shelter used by his family had no running water and the weather came in through cracks in the roof and walls on the children as the huddled in bed at night. I will never forget his description of how in a hard snow, there would be lines of snow across the floor of their home, including across his bed. As a young boy, he would cajole as many cats as he could under the pile of covers to help keep his feet warm. In this backdrop of poverty, the family's misfortunes were compounded when Papaw's father, my great-grandfather, went to prison. When this happened, Papaw said everyone turned their backs on the family and left his mother and her children to fend for themselves. Nowhere was this more pronounced than when his mother took her children to church. People at the church turned up their noses at the poor hillbilly children sitting on the pews in shoes with holes that showed sock feet. My grandfather told stories of how families would cross to the other side of the street if his mother and siblings were passing. The churches, he felt, had been somewhat kinder to his mother when she was a longsuffering wife with a husband who had trouble with the bottle. Sure she and her children were trash, but they made a nice a charity case for the church. However, when Papaw's dad went to prison, that all ended.



So the little church Papaw had found on his way to Myrtle Beach had intrigued him. It was a church without the pain of his religious experience. It was a church without people, just a place you could get off by yourself and pray. In building the Little Brookside Chapel, he built a church for himself and others, but was also trying to heal an old wound that had festered over the years. He had been deeply hurt seeing his mother treated poorly by "church people" but somehow he had never blamed God for this, understanding Psalm 118 better than most: "It is better to trust in the lord than to put confidence in man." With the chapel, it was as if he found a kind of redemption and wanted the world to share in it.

In the late 1980's and through the 1990's the church became a

popular community fixture, and several guest books were filled up over the years from folks who were passing through or heard about the chapel. There were numerous weddings at the tiny church. In the early 2000's the church was vandalized repeatedly. "Don't they see," I remember Papaw saying, "This church is for all the people! It don't matter what you believe." He fixed the chapel repeatedly, had it repainted and kept it open for the sinners and tourists who might have a need. Papaw would say that the vandals probably hated church because they had been looked down on, and that if they knew him they might have a lot in common. In April of 2005, arsonists burnt the church to the ground. After that, I saw the spark in my grandfather's eyes begin to dim. He did not rebuild the church. "Those bastards will just burn it down again," he explained. The Asheville-Buncombe County Arson Task Force never had any leads in the fire. The church had been open 24 hours a day, seven days a week for more than 21 years.

For many believers church is not just a building in which you pray. For many, attending church is also about community, about making connections with other people. Part of me mourns that my grandfather never found a church community where he found this kind of connection. But when I think about it, he found community in other ways. He loved to go fishing with drinking buddies, although it might be more accurate to say he loved to go drinking with fishing buddies. He kept up with some of the policemen he'd served with, became involved in Woodfin politics, and had a large family with many grandchildren and great grandchildren to keep him busy. He also loved animals, rescuing abandoned feral cats from the neighborhood, which he then chastised constantly for attacking the birds that flocked to his yard for the dozens of birdfeeders he'd installed and kept full.

We lost Papaw in October of 2012. He'd lived his whole life in the mountains of North Carolina, where his ancestors

settled after coming from Scotland before the Revolutionary War. For the last several years of his life, he talked wistfully about the chapel, and it was such a fixture in his life that his sons, upon his death, had his and his wife's tombstone engraved with an image of the chapel.

I visited the site of the Little Brookside Chapel last winter. Back away from the church site there was a section of the little white picket fence that used to stand out front. A sign from the church was also on the property, faded by time, the letters barely legible. As I walked back along the creek behind where the church once stood I saw the wooden cross my grandfather had mounted between two large creek rocks there on the bank. It still stands there, defiant, marking a place where even a sinner like me can get close to God and say a prayer, unjudged by man.

