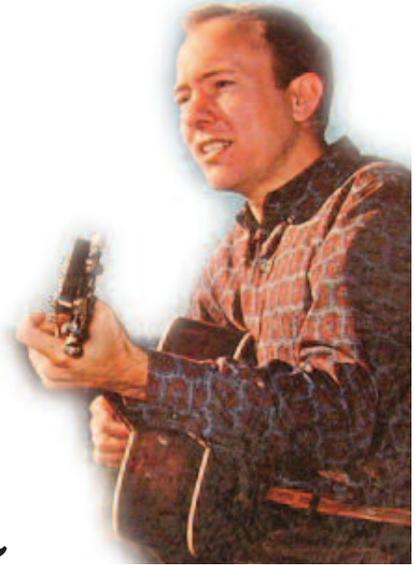




## Artists' Stories

*"It all started there in those Boone County mountains. Almost every song I've ever written that really means something to me is connected in some way to West Virginia, where I grew up."*

# Billy Edd Wheeler



# It was a different world.

When Billy Edd Wheeler was growing up in a Boone County coal camp, his mom got him a guitar for Christmas. "She got it out of the Sears Roebuck catalogue," he said. "It cost \$14."

"I practiced till my fingers about began to bleed," he said. "A neighbor man, a coal miner, showed me chords."

His family lived in a little coal company house at the top of a skinny holler in a Boone County coal camp called Highcoal. "I could throw a rock from our porch and hit the mountainside across the dirt road," he said. "I didn't have to throw hard. That's how close together the mountains were."

He didn't know then that he would grow up to be a famous songwriter. He didn't know world-famous singers like Elvis and Johnny Cash would record his songs. He didn't know that. He was just crazy about music.

He sang songs he heard on his friend's radio. "I'd go down there and listen, and we'd try to learn the words."

Highcoal was miles away from any other town, at the top of a mountain. Anchor Coal Company built it around 1900, to give the miners who worked in their mine a place to live.

The coal company owned every house in Highcoal. The company owned every yard, store, church, school, and street, just like they did in coal camps all over southern West Virginia.

About 200 families lived in Highcoal when Billy Edd was a kid. The little wooden company houses were painted white. Everybody had an outhouse. One of Billy Edd's most famous songs was *Ode to the Little Brown Shack Out Back*. "I did sixteen years of firsthand research to write that song," he said.

Nobody had running water. "For drinking water, we'd carry buckets down to a hand pump, then haul them back up the hill," he said. "We got wash water from the creek across the road."

His mother kept a big washtub on the porch. "We'd pour buckets of creek water through a cloth stretched across that tub, to strain out sticks and rocks, stuff like that."

# WEST VIRGINIA MUSIC HALL OF FAME



*Billy Edd Wheeler painted this picture of Highcoal, the Boone County coal camp where he grew up. The coal mine is on the far mountainside to the left. Every day, coal trains ran on the railroad tracks in the bottom right corner.*

*To get the coal across the valley from the mine to the trains, the coal company used big buckets on heavy cables. You can see them in the painting. On one side, the miners shoveled coal into big buckets that passed over the town on the cables. On the train side, the buckets would dump coal into railroad cars, then travel back empty to the other side to be loaded again.*

*The big blue roof at the bottom left is the community building. Billy Edd's house is the last of the row of little houses going up the holler on the right.*

It was the 1930s. "It was a different world. We didn't have TVs or bikes or Internet, and the only blackberries we had were the kind you eat."

Billy Edd and his buddies still found plenty of ways to have fun. "We'd play with anything." In winter, they made igloos. In summer, they drifted around town, playing marbles, Kick the Can, Hide and Seek and pocket knife games. "We'd cut up old rubber tires and make giant slingshot guns to play cops and robbers with. We'd fix the slingshots so we could fire clothespins at each other."

"Sometimes we'd get an old tire, and one kid would curl up inside it, and another kid would roll them down the hill. It was a crazy ride. After your ride, you'd get out and stagger around."

They made their own baseballs. "We'd wrap paper around a rock, tight as we could." Then they'd wind string around it. "We'd layer it till it got about the size of a baseball. Then we'd wrap it with black tape, and that would be our ball." They batted with flat sticks.

"Sometimes we'd go up by the railroad tracks and do daredevil stuff, climb the steel ladders on the side of the coal train and run along the top of the coal cars. When we'd see a sandy place down below, we'd jump off." If the train was moving, you had to roll when you hit the ground.

"We didn't have money or a lot of stuff, and my stepfather was rough on me at home, but I don't remember being bored."

## *"The company owned everything."*

The coal camp was its own world. Till the fourth grade, Billy Edd went to a one-room school the company built. "I learned my first letters and read my first stories around a pot-bellied stove, with twenty or thirty other kids, all in together."

In the early morning when he got up, "there wasn't much daylight peeping over the mountain yet." He could look out the window and see the little lights on the miners' hats bobbing up the mountainside in the dark.

"They were on their way up the hill to the coal mine. And sometimes one miner's light would hit the guy in front of him, then that guy's light would hit the next guy. It looked like a chain of light, like they were towing each other up the hill with light."

The miners went inside the mountain to mine the coal. They needed light and good air. "The company pumped fresh air in to them with big fans that went EHH-HHHHHH all day long. That sound was always there. As long as you heard it, you knew the miners had good air." If it stopped, that meant trouble.

All the kids knew there could be an accident inside the mine at any time. When Billy Edd was about 10, he saw a miner carried down to the town with blood all over his head. "They loaded him in an ambulance. Everyone was there," he said. "I couldn't watch for long."

Later, he wrote the song, *Red Winged Blackbird* about the danger in the mines.

Every kid knew there could be an accident any day. They knew the coal company could fire their dads or lay them off any day.

# WEST VIRGINIA MUSIC HALL OF FAME



*With Aunt June, his mother's sister*

If a miner lost his job, his family had to leave the company house, so they'd lose their home too. Billy Edd's song, *Coal Tattoo*, is the story of a miner who lost his job.

The company hired white and black miners, but the black families had to live in the lower part of town. Their kids didn't go to the coal company school. "It wasn't right, but that's how it was back then," Billy Edd said.

There was only one store in Highcoal, and the company owned it. If people wanted to buy food or supplies, they climbed the steep, winding path to the company store, where they could buy canned food, dried food, furniture, butchered meat, clothes, tools, shoes, lamps, whatever.

There was a community building below the store, where people met to trade news and gossip, get their hair cut, see movies, mail letters, and so forth. "There was a pool room in the back where men shot pool, gambled, drank beer and smoked cigarettes," Billy Edd said. "Kids couldn't go in there unless you had a message to give to somebody."

The company sold candy, ice cream and beer in another part of the community building. On weekends, they showed movies upstairs. Kids waited for the school bus out front. In summer, men set up tables in front of the community building and played cards. Upstairs, they worked out on punching bags and boxed, practicing for the company boxing team.

Anchor Coal's boxing team and baseball team played miners from other coal companies. When there was a big game or match, Billy Edd said, people piled in trucks "and we'd ride to wherever it was, and cheer like the dickens for our side."

At least twice a day, on the railroad tracks above the store, coal trains pulled out, loaded with coal the men had mined that day. They rolled through a mile-long tunnel toward Charleston.

"The company owned everything," Billy Edd said.

## *"It ain't no good morning for me."*

Billy Edd Wheeler wrote his first song when he was about 14. "It was inspired by my paper boy job," he said.

"It was a big deal to get to deliver papers in Highcoal, because you could make a little money if you were lucky. So rain, sleet or snow, I got up at 4:30 in the morning and walked down to the middle of camp. They left the papers under a porch, the Charleston Gazette.

"I'd take them out and fold them and put them in my bag. Sometimes, if it was snowing, my fingers would be so cold, I could hardly fold the papers. I had my route memorized, through the black section of High Coal, up through the white section, to leave those papers."

Delivering papers was easy, compared with collecting what people owed. "When collection time came, I'd knock on a door, and a woman'd come out and say, 'Well honey, I ain't got no money. Old man's got it. He's up at the pool hall gambling. Go get it from him.'

"So I'd go up to the pool room and ask to talk with So-and-So, and he'd say, 'She's lying to you, boy. She's got the money. You go back down there and make her give it to you.'"

# WEST VIRGINIA MUSIC HALL OF FAME



"So I'd go back and forth, and sometimes I didn't get any money at all. But I did write a song about it. Not a memorable song, but since it was the first one I wrote, I remember it."

Here's what he wrote: *I'm just a paper boy, rise up so early in the morning. I got that lonesome feeling. Feeling creeps on me without no warning. They say, Good morning, Mr. Paper Boy. Well, it ain't no good morning for me, 'cause I hear that wind a-howlin' through them hickory trees.* — Paperboy

"It got me started," he said. "I played it on my guitar. You've got to start somewhere."

## *Trying to make a nickel, hoping for a quarter*

None of the coal camp kids had any money, Billy Edd said. "So we were always looking for ways to make a nickel."

They'd catch minnows in the creek to sell for bait. "You held a coffee sack out underwater, and your buddy splashed down through the creek and drove minnows into your sack. Then you dumped them in a bucket and tried to sell them to men who liked to fish."

Billy Edd's teacher paid him to clean out her chicken coop. "That was a stinking job. Chicken poop has lots of ammonia in it. It can take your breath away."

The company store clerk let him deliver groceries. "The store didn't pay you, but the person you delivered to might give you a nickel or a dime. And every now and then, somebody'd give you a quarter. Then you'd really think you'd struck it rich."

One day, the clerk asked him to deliver a big box of groceries to the company doctor's house. That house was bigger and nicer than the miners' houses were, "so I thought, 'Oh boy, I'm going to get a quarter this time,'" Billy Edd said.

The box was heavy, piled full of cans, milk and potatoes. Billy Edd was sweating as he carried it down the hill from the store. He was thinking what he could buy with that quarter.

He lugged the box up the next hill, across the creek, up the curving road to the doctor's house. "To a kid delivering groceries, that house looked like a mansion. They had roses. It was made out of nicer wood and painted a different color. It had a nice roof."

He carried the box around to the back door, where the doctor's wife let him into the kitchen. He dawdled around after he set it on the table, but she didn't offer him any tip. "So I left with no quarter, not even a nickel," he remembers. "I was really disappointed."

As he walked around the house, she opened the window and said, "Wait just a minute, young man."

"I thought, 'Well, maybe I'll get my quarter after all.'" She came back to the window and tossed him something. He caught it. "It was a Life Saver, one white peppermint Life Saver. Not the whole package, just one Life Saver," he said.

"She told me, 'Bless your heart, little boy, I hope Santy Claus comes to see you.'" Then she walked away from the window.



Young Billy Edd with his Uncle Vincent. Uncle Vincent had a wooden leg. Billy Edd wrote a song called "Uncle Vincent's Wooden Leg."

Billy Edd stared at her house a few seconds, then went on down the hill. "It was a startling experience for a boy to have," he said. "It taught me that you can't tell how generous people are going to be by where they live or their position in life. If you have more money, that doesn't mean you'll be more generous."

On the way down the hill, he ate the Life Saver. "You ate it or you lost it," he said.

## *Billy Edd runs away from home*

Billy Edd ran away to his grandfather's house several times because he and his stepdad did not get along. "It was rough living with him," he said. "I'd look at birds flying over the mountain and wish I could go with them."

One night, his stepfather knocked him around because he hadn't washed some pots and pans. He ran off the next day, headed for his grandfather, about 15 miles away.

To get there, he had to walk through a dark, mile-long train tunnel through the mountain. "I got up early and left home. They thought I was going to wait for the school bus, but I climbed to the railroad tracks and started through the tunnel."

He had a flashlight. "Water was dripping down all around. The railroad ties were slippery, and there was water in a ditch on both sides." After he came around the first curve, he saw the tiny light at the end of the tunnel, a mile away. "It looked like the eye of a needle."

The light grew as he walked, till it was the size of a peanut, then a ping pong ball. Then suddenly, about halfway through, the rails started vibrating, and an awful roar filled the tunnel. The light disappeared. A train had started into the other end of the tunnel.

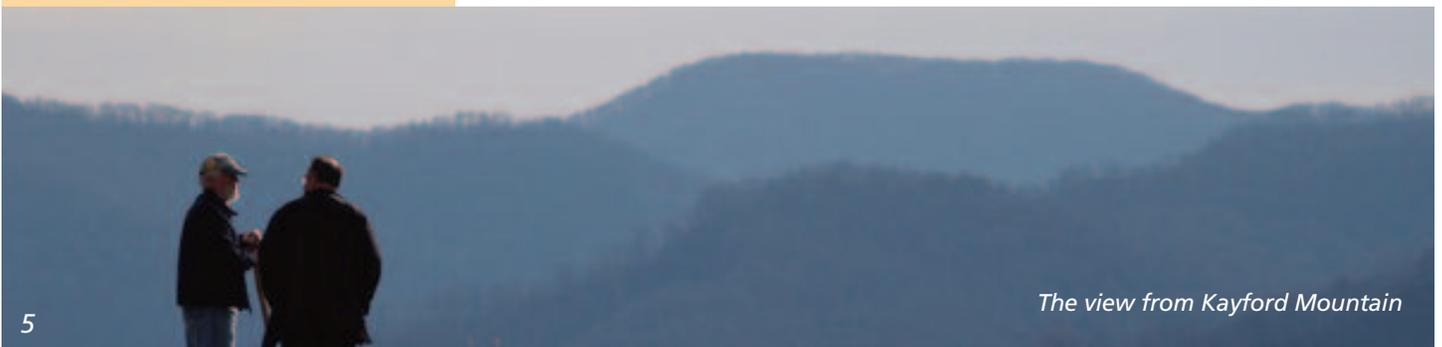
It was barreling down the tracks, straight for him. He jumped off the tracks and pressed against the wet wall. The roar filled the tunnel. There was hardly any space between the wall and the tracks. "Suddenly it hit me that, if anything was sticking off the train, a metal rod, say, it could slice me open!"

He threw himself in the icy water in the ditch. As the train passed, he was pelted all over by rocks the wheels kicked out.

After the last car passed and the roar died away, he picked himself up. "The smoke was so terrible, it was hard to breathe. I still had the flashlight, but it didn't help much."

Shaking, he found his baloney sandwich and apple. The bag was busted. Suddenly he was very hungry. He ate the sandwich, then made his way slowly down the tracks. At the other end of the tunnel, when he came out into sunshine, Kayford Mountain was green above him. "Today, Kayford Mountain has been strip mined away," he said, "but that day, it was beautiful."

He made his way down a steep path, past a coal mine, down to the hard road. He walked most of the ten miles to his grandfather's house. "I walked and walked before somebody gave me a ride."



*The view from Kayford Mountain*

# WEST VIRGINIA MUSIC HALL OF FAME

*"Luck has a lot to do with what happens in life, but when your chance comes, it's up to you to take it"*



"I thought maybe my grandfather and I could be bachelors together." He stayed two months, then his grandfather sent him back home.

When he got to Highcoal, a Presbyterian missionary was teaching craft classes in the pool hall. She told Billy Edd about a school in North Carolina where mountain boys could go to school their last two years of high school, if they worked off part of the cost.

He jumped at the chance. "Going there changed my life. I got away from my stepfather, and I started learning folk music. I met storytellers and really got inspired to write songs and tell stories. People started asking me to sing and play guitar at gatherings.

"That was such a lucky break," he said. "I always knew I wanted to get educated, but I'm not sure I could have figured out how to do it on my own. I didn't want to work in the coal mines. I was lucky somebody came along and gave me a chance.

"Luck has a lot to do with what happens in life," he said. "But when your chance comes, it's up to you to take it."

## *An honorable man*

Billy Edd Wheeler went to college, two years at Warren Wilson, two years at Berea. "When I came back home to Highcoal in the summers, I'd make money how I could, paint houses for the coal company or do whatever job they'd give me.

"When I was 17, they put me with an older man named Hudson. They wanted to mine a coal seam high up the mountain, and they wanted us to find out how much coal was in that seam."

"We had a pick, a shovel, a wheelbarrow and an auger. And we had packages of dynamite, about 6 inches long and maybe an inch and a half in diameter, in heavy waxed paper."

They drove to the mountain. "It was almost straight up to the seam, so Mr. Hudson tied a rope to the front of the wheelbarrow. He'd pull, and I would push. It took us hours to get up there. That was the hardest work I've ever done in my life."

They dug back into the hillside. "He'd drill, and I'd turn. We'd scrape the slate and mud off, then drill some more. We dug in three or four feet, then he stacked the rock face with dynamite. He'd put two or three sticks of dynamite in a hole, then put a cap in there.

"He'd attach it to a cord, then bring the cord outside, and we'd take it around to the side." After they were safe, "he'd touch those two live ends to a battery and WHOOM, the dynamite blew up! The coal and rock blew straight out that opening.

"We'd wait a few minutes till the smoke cleared, then go shovel out the debris. We had to hunker down to get in there. Thirty-six inches is not very high, so you're on your knees. We could get the wheelbarrow in there, and we could load it, just barely. Then I'd push it out.

"After a week of pick, pick, pick, then shovel, shovel, shovel and drill, drill, I could hardly get out of bed. But after the second week, I felt pretty good. I was getting toughened up.

"I learned a lot, working with Mr. Hudson. He was a very honest man. He said he worked on the section gang on the railroad when he was 17. They'd work way off working where nobody could see them, and those other men would loaf, but he said, 'I never did. I worked. I wanted to earn my money.' The other men would get mad at him, but he said, 'I didn't care.'"

# WEST VIRGINIA MUSIC HALL OF FAME



*This abandoned coal camp house at Highcoal was probably built by Anchor Coal Company. The coal mine has shut down, and Highcoal has almost totally gone back to nature.*

One day, after they left the job, they found Mr. Hudson's watch had stopped. "Mr. Hudson discovered we had left a half hour early. So the next day, we worked an hour overtime.

"We were away from the town, and nobody would have known if we didn't work at all. But Mr. Hudson knew.

"He was an honorable man. He made a big impression on me."

## *There's nothing left of it now.*

A few years ago, Billy Edd Wheeler went back to see Highcoal. Anchor Coal has shut down the coal mine. Nobody lives in Highcoal anymore. But he wanted to see what was left of the place where he grew up.

By then, the songs he wrote had sold millions of records. He had lived in Nashville for years, then moved to North Carolina. He has gold records on his walls for songs like *Jackson*, *The Reverend Mr. Black*, and *Ode to the Little Brown Shack Out Back*. Elvis, Johnny Cash, Judy Collins, Neil Young and at least 100 other people had recorded his songs.

"But it all started there in those Boone County mountains," he said. "Almost every song I've ever written that really means something to me is connected in some way to West Virginia, where I grew up."

As he drove up the mountain toward Highcoal, he was remembering coal trains, kids playing in creeks, miners' lamps and stars, the company store, movies and boxing, the tunnel and the trains.

"About halfway up, I saw a couple of boys on the porch by the road," he said. "I rolled down the window and said, 'Is Highcoal still up there?'"

"They looked at each other and shrugged. They'd never heard of it."

He drove on. "The road began to crumble. Pretty soon, it was a dirt road. Then the dirt road ran out too. I should have been at the head of the holler, right near where I used to live."

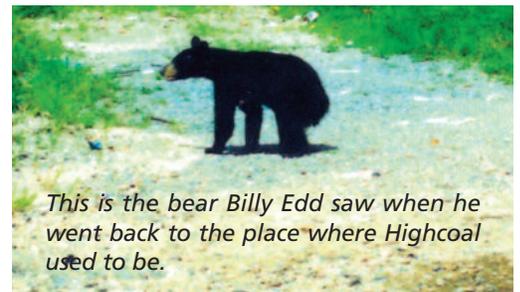
There was no town, no crumbling buildings, no nothing. "Instead, there was a black bear sitting there waiting for me. Soon as I got close, that bear looked me over, then stood up and ambled off toward the creek.

"The place where Highcoal used to be is all overgrown, covered with kudzu vines and weeds," he said. "I couldn't tell for sure where my house used to be.

"I guess, after they closed the mine, the company tore down the whole town." The company piled big rocks at the entrance to the mile-long tunnel, to keep people out. "The company store and the poolroom are gone. There's no miner's houses, no lamp house, nothing."

While he stood there, the bear came up out of the creek and shuffled toward the place where Highcoal used to be.

"It was such a strange feeling to stand there remembering so much, knowing this is the place where it all happened, but there's nothing left of it now," he said. "It's just very strange."



*This is the bear Billy Edd saw when he went back to the place where Highcoal used to be.*

*Story by Kate Long, from interviews with Billy Edd Wheeler.*