

AUSTIN
CITY
LIMITS

LORETTA LYNN



★ ALL-AMERICAN MUSIC ★

Queen of Country Music

Sept. 8, 2002----

PAINTSVILLE, Ky.--The Country Music Highway curls like a phrase about unbendin' lovin' through the hills of eastern Kentucky. The highway, also known as U.S. 23, winds through seven Kentucky counties from the Ohio border south to the Virginia state line.

Country music stars Loretta Lynn, Crystal Gayle, Patty Loveless, the Judds, Ricky Skaggs and Dwight Yoakam were born along this 150-mile stretch of four-lane highway.

Yoakam even wrote a song about the highway, called "Read'n, Write'n and Route 23." Tom T. Hall and the late Keith Whitley came from neighboring counties.

This is rugged coal-mining country.

Rich minerals run under the stately mountains, lush trees and sandstone.

"Daddy had a picture of union mine organizer John L. Lewis up in our house," says Loretta Lynn, who grew up in Butcher Hollow near Paintsville. "Daddy was making a dollar a day. When John L. Lewis came into the picture, I remember my mother saying he was the guy who made sure miners got more pay. Daddy would go into what we called coal banks. I'd crawl in there with Daddy with my buckets and sacks. He'd pick that coal out and I'd rake it up and put it the bucket or the sack. He couldn't get rid of me."

Coal mines in eastern Kentucky have since shut down, which crippled the economy. Some underground mines remain, but most of the mining is strip mining, where the tops of the mountains are stripped for coal. The state of Kentucky then restores the land. Roadies can still catch coal trucks as they drive the Country Music Highway.

Between 1959 and 1979 Kentucky Gov. Paul Patton mined coal with his own small company. "I've been all the way from hand-loading with mules to the most modern equipment," Patton says in a phone interview. "Mining is the basis of the economy in Appalachian Kentucky. Production is the same, but efficiency has been increased so much that employment is probably a third of what it was in 1975."

Patton is looking at country music tourism to bring money back into eastern Kentucky. Years ago it worked in Nashville, Tenn. It worked in Branson, Mo. It has worked on a small scale in Myrtle Beach, S.C. Kentucky is hoping it will work here. Patton has increased the state's tourism budget 25 percent since he took office in 1996.

In the central part of the state on U.S. 25, about 53 miles south of Lexington, the \$6

million Kentucky Music Hall of Fame and Museum opened earlier this year in Renfro Valley. The museum is within walking distance of the Renfro Valley Theater.

The highlight of Renfro Valley is a late 1930s barn which is the site of the Renfro Valley Barn Dance and a 12-year-old state-of-the-art theater that features national country acts in an intimate setting that holds 1,600 fans.

Renfro Valley founder John Lair used the WLS Barn Dance in Chicago as a model for his country theme park, which was constructed between 1937 and 1939.

Early Renfro Valley performers included Chicago-based Homer & Jethro, guitar picker Merle Travis and Red Foley, who began his career here before attaining stardom as host of the Ozark Jubilee in Springfield, Mo. Besides the barn, Renfro Valley includes 12 hewed log tourist cabins and the Renfro Valley Lodge, a huge dining room with a long soda fountain made from solid cherry.

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Kentucky is a state of hills, valleys and hollows.

Or "hollers," as they say around these parts.

Country music Hall of Famer Loretta Lynn was born in a one-room log cabin in a Butcher Hollow homestead near Paintsville (pop. 4,700, named after Paint Creek). She grew up with eight siblings in a four-room frame house that was built in the 1890s.

Patriarch Ted Webb was a miner at the Van Lear coal mines who suffered from black lung disease. Butcher Hollow was popularized in "Coal Miner's Daughter," the hit 1980 film about Lynn's hardscrabble life.

Lynn lived in Butcher Hollow--named after her grandparents Butcher--until age 13, when she met O. V. (Doolittle) Lynn at a school social. They married within the year. Along with Lynn's brother Jay Kee (Junior) Webb, the young couple hitchhiked from Kentucky to Washington state, where Lynn embarked on her singing career.

"When I left Butcher Holler, it was just a dirt path," Lynn recalls in a phone interview. "There was mud to my knees. All the Butchers got mad at me because they wanted me to build a highway to the head of that holler. I said, 'I walked the mud to my knees and got out of there. So can you.' " And you will. Soul singer Percy Sledge once sang that "True Love Travels on a Gravel Road," and it is a narrow gravel incline that leads to the hollow. Bus tours and honkin' SUVs are not recommended.

The Van Lear mines outside Paintsville closed in 1955. Clara and Ted Webb

moved their family to Wabash, Ind. Lynn was already in the Pacific Northwest, but the rest of the clan included Lynn's younger sister, Brenda Gayle Webb, now known as singer Crystal Gayle. In 1959, at age 14, Lynn became pregnant with her first child. Her father died that same year. He rests in Butcher Hollow.

Butcher Hollow is one of the most down-to-earth stops along the Country Music Highway. After all, the tour guide for Lynn's childhood home is Herman Webb, her chatty older brother. He is worth the \$5 suggested admission. He is a precious living piece of folk art.

"We lived in this house when I was a baby," Webb says, swinging on a front porch swing made of oak. "And I'm just 65 years old now, still a young fella. As I remember it, we cleared off the grounds and formed these steep hills."

The family farmed beans and corn in the hollow. Webb says, "You either worked or you might get a little hungry. There wasn't any welfare and food stamps. When someone was lazy, they were real lazy back then."

The homeplace did not have electricity. A modest battery radio was conserved for the live Grand Ole Opry and Renfro Valley music shows on Saturday night. "Everybody liked Roy Acuff," Webb says. "Brother Oswald. Ernest Tubb. Later on, Hank Williams."

A front living room is adorned with family pictures, shots from "Coal Miner's Daughter" and an autographed picture of the late restaurateur Bob Evans, who visited the house. Other notable figures to check out the homeplace include the late Tammy Wynette, bluegrass stars John and Audrey Wiggins, Cheryl Ladd and George Hamilton IV.

A mutt named Muffin is the star of the adjoining front bedroom, where Clara and Ted slept. Muffin is sprawled out, legs up on a tattered couch. Webb says, "We didn't have a couch, but the rest of the furniture is original. The dress on the wall is the one Loretta performed in during the 1960s. That little red suit is where she had a softball team at Fan Fair in Nashville." Webb points to a picture and says, "This guy here is my dad's youngest brother, and that guitar there belonged to him." An acoustic blonde Kay guitar from the early 1950s lies on a bed. Webb proudly says, "It is the first guitar Loretta played."

Lynn used that guitar to sing country hits that were ahead of their time. In a 1960s Nashville where female artists were relegated to subservient roles, Lynn sang songs about independence and self-reliance.

Her hits included: "Don't Come Home A Drinkin' (With Lovin' on Your Mind)," "Fist City," "Your Squaw Is on the Warpath," and "The Pill." I wondered how those tunes played out in traditional Butcher Hollow.

"I don't remember asking them how they felt," Lynn says matter-of-factly. "Everybody thought 'Rings Upon Your Horns' which was banned by some radio stations was dirty but me. I was just talkin' about the devils having horns and the angels having wings." And then Lynn sings, 'You're the first to ever make me/to fall in love and then not take me.' That's the way it was and if they all think it's dirty, then that's the way it will go."

The Webbs' laundry was done in a room that was also part of the rear kitchen. Webb points to a washing machine near the kitchen table. "That washing machine used to have a gasoline motor on it," Webb says with a smile. "Maytag Gasoline Washing Machine--that's what I called it." A nearby pantry used to be filled with up to 700 cans of food that Webb says his mother stored away for winter months in the hollow. Off the kitchen is the dining room with the original dining room table.

Just like Elvis' Graceland, an upstairs bedroom is not open to the public. (It is used for storage.) During the spring and summer all the children slept upstairs. When the upstairs got too cold in the winter months, the front living room doubled as a bedroom. The baby of the family slept with the parents, and the rest of the kids slept in this room.

Webb says there was never a fight for the outhouse, steps away from the home. He explains, "What you never had, you never missed."

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The remnants of the old Van Lear coal mining town are at the foot of the hollow. The Consolidated Coal Co. owned Van Lear. Most of the homes built by Consolidated Coal have been torn down. People from all over the world came to work in the five underground coal mines around Van Lear, according to Jim Williams, executive director of Paintsville Tourism.

Webb says, "I was told by one old coal miner there were 8,000 people who lived there. We used to have five coal mines from Highway 321 which parallels U.S. 23 to the mouth of the holler down here. We had city police, stores and everything. We called it a coal camp. We could live in this holler all winter and never go to Paintsville."

About 1,500 people live around Butcher Hollow today. Besides a few homes, all that is left is Webb's Grocery Store, which is run by Webb's 46-year-old daughter, Madonna Webb. She remembers that when she was in junior high, Crystal Gayle was in high school. "She would drive me to school," Madonna says from behind the store counter. "Her hair was down to her hips then. Long straight hair was the thing back then. We ironed our hair."

Webb's Grocery Store was built by Consolidated Coal in 1908. It was originally named the No. 5 store, which referred to the No. 5 coal mine where Ted worked.

Lynn and the rest of her family shopped at the store. It still functions as a general store with canned goods, soda pop and souvenirs, which include small chunks of coal. For \$18 I picked up a beautiful landscape of the homeplace on cut poplar that was painted by Madonna.

Herman Webb says, "I'm the one who takes care of everything. I just open the house when somebody wants to tour it. I live right down the road. They stop at the store and they call me at my house. I come up here and open it up."

The childhood home has no telephone.

Webb uses the donations for upkeep. "The state uses it for advertising," he says.

Does the state help with funding for the historical landmark?

He laughs and answers, "No, no they've never done nothin' like that. I couldn't even get them to grade the roads. Some days 300 cars go up this holler. I can't get them all through the house, but they get up here. This is about the wooliest part of Kentucky, ain't it? My peoples have been in this holler since the early 1800s. My great-grandparents on both sides of my daddy's family died right in this holler and are buried in this holler. My grandpa and grandma are buried in this holler and so are my dad and mother. We've been here since time started."

Lynn adds, "Usually when I go back to Kentucky, I run through every room of that house. I'm like a kid. Finally, last year when I was back there, I stood on the front porch, looked at the place and thought, 'How did I get out of there?' If it wasn't for Doolittle (her late husband), I would probably still be there."