

BY JOAN VANORSDALL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHUCK ALMAREZ

— YOU CAN'T GO —
Home Again

...WELL, *maybe* YOU CAN.



Twenty-three years after she left a small dying town – at least in part to be able to write a novel based on that town – a former Roanoker has gone back to Clifton Forge to begin anew . . . again.

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT GOING HOME AGAIN,

and of the place that drew me back. It's also a story about learning to tell a story. Mine, and that of a small mountain town that didn't give up. Our stories – Clifton Forge's and mine – are tangled together like wild berry vines . . . thorns, fruit, and all.

"Never go back to live in a town you lived in before. Things change, and you'll be disappointed," my mother told me.

But three months after retiring from full-time teaching in the Roanoke Valley, I did just that. I put my Raleigh Court house on the market, put a contract on a mountainside house in Clifton Forge that overlooked the trainyards and the Jackson River, and moved back to the town I'd left 23 years earlier.

If I had five dollars for every time a Roanoke friend said, slowly, "You're moving where?" I would be able to pay off my mortgage.

You can't go home again? Thomas Wolfe wrote a whole novel about it, called it, in fact, "You Can't Go Home Again."

Or can you? For now, let the question float, and listen to the story.

Once upon a time, Clifton Forge was rich. First it was the iron mines: the Alleghany Highlands were known as the Iron Capital of Virginia. In 1827, Colonel John Jordan and his partner John Irvine built the first hot blast furnace in the South, naming it after their wives: The Lucy Selina. Fueled by charcoal from endless forests and fed with vast deposits of iron ore near Iron Gate, the Lucy Selina Furnace produced iron that was shipped all over the world. Alleghany iron, it was called.

Listen to the names of the iron furnaces that followed: the Dolly Ann, Roaring Run, the Princess, the Jane, the Low Moor. And the Clifton Forge, tucked under the towering Rainbow Rock on the banks of the Jackson River.

Alleghany iron was used to build the first two iron-clad battleships, the *Merrimac* and the *Monitor*. The March, 1861 battle was declared a draw when neither ship could be destroyed. (Civil War trivia: A year later, Confederate troops blew up the *Merrimac* to keep it from Union control.)

Maybe the destruction of the *Merrimac* served as

foreshadowing of the downfall of the Alleghany iron dynasty. Colonel Jordan's son and partner Edwin hung himself in the wake of the Confederate surrender, in despair over the loss of slave labor and the ruin of the South. And the Great Lakes iron ore – more accessible and easily shipped on ore tankers – brought an end to the Iron Age in Alleghany County.

But the railroads were coming with fierce progress, and Clifton Forge was poised for a second wave of prosperity.

THE TRAINYARDS are what you notice first when you arrive in Clifton Forge. There's no way into this town that doesn't involve tracks. The railyard runs the length of Clifton Forge, paralleling the Jackson River, and the coal trains from West Virginia move east to Newport News, and the woodpulp cars move west to the Covington paper mill, and three days a week, the Amtrak Cardinal whooshes through town, one on its way northeast to Washington and a few hours later, the train northwest to Chicago. The whistles echo off the mountain, and you can't help it, you have to be thinking about faraway places when you stand at the edge of the town's railyards, and the sun glints off the rails and the river.

In the early 20th century, the railroad was the core of Clifton Forge's economy. Three divisions of the Chesapeake and Ohio had their terminal point here. In 1916, on most days, 14 passenger trains departed from Clifton Forge. An aerial photograph of the town taken a century ago is dominated by roundhouses, power plants, machine shops, and locomotive repair shops. And tracks – lots and lots of traintracks.

Until the 1950s, when diesel locomotives had pretty much replaced steam engines and interstate trucking was cheap and easy, the Clifton Forge C & O shops employed nearly half of the city's 5,800 people. Clifton Forge was a boom town, a company town, a town on the move.

I came to Clifton Forge in 1982. I was a child, barely 30: wife, mother of one with a second on the way, a fledgling writer, a Yankee flatlander who had always wanted to live in the Virginia mountains. I was pretty sure I'd won the lottery, settling in Clifton Forge. Where

The C&O Heritage Center, from the A Street Bridge in Clifton Forge, is framed by the hills and valleys of the Alleghany Highlands in the background.



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Clockwise from top left: The Masonic Amphitheater in Clifton Forge was designed and built by students in the Virginia Tech Design/Build program and opened in 2012; the Virginia Highlands Pipe and Drums performed at the July 4th celebration which ended with a magnificent fireworks display; the C&O 614 steam locomotive is on display at the C&O Heritage Center in Clifton Forge.

there was a community college. A collection of young professional families with lots of kids. A Leggett department store. Upscale men’s, women’s, and men’s clothing shops. A tony French restaurant run by a former White House pastry chef. There was a furniture store and a movie theater and two grocery stores. There was a Beaux-Arts post office and a city school system. A library.

And the mountains. The trains.

It all spelled home to me. I had more children. I wrote articles. I did Good Works in a town that relied on Good Works for its survival. I was part of this town, and the town was part of me.

In the mid 1980s, the C&O began moving its diesel shops from Clifton Forge to Huntington, W.Va. And things changed. One by one, the young families left. The stores closed, and the paint began to peel. I am guessing that the people who came off the interstate looking for gas or food in town were most likely thinking that they were mighty glad they didn’t live here.

Then there was the Kim-Stan Landfill, on the edge of town. Built by a former stripminer from Norton and a local partner, the landfill grew deep and wide

on a site riddled with underground springs near the Jackson River. On bad days, more than a hundred semis loaded with garbage from Northeastern cities rolled through the chainlink Kim-Stan gates. There was not a single thing good about the landfill, and the battlelines were drawn in indelible ink. I took my three children and joined the pickets across the road from the dump. It was invasion, pure and simple, and when your home turf is invaded, there’s not much to do but fight . . . and write.

I TELL MYSELF THAT IT WAS NECESSARY for me to leave Clifton Forge in 1990...that I never would have written my first novel, “Solitary Places,” if I had stayed. On my youngest child’s first day of kindergarten, I sat down in Roanoke and began to write the story of the people and place I’d left behind.

I’d planned to write a nonfiction book, a southern version of Jonathan Harr’s “A Civil Action.” The story of penny ante environmental villains against small-town activists trying to save their place, their lives. What I found was that it wasn’t the legal battles that needed to be chronicled – it was the lives of people, and the survival of a town that needed to be told.



“Solitary Places” was a lovesong to home, a celebration of time and place and courage.

I didn’t know that when I wrote it. But now I do.

Twenty years after “Solitary Places,” Clifton Forge is different. There’s a Tea Room and an Irish shop on Ridgeway Street. A couple of comfortable, history-filled bed-and-breakfasts. A fledgling school of the arts, where you can learn to paint, play an instrument, speak a foreign language, or write a screenplay. A C & O Railway Heritage Center. An award-winning amphitheater with a full docket of summer concerts and a nearby historic theater undergoing extensive renovation. A metalworking and photography studio. The Allegheny Highlands Arts and Crafts Center – its gallery and gift shop the anchor of downtown shopping – is celebrating its 30th anniversary. Houses are being renovated by new retirees and enterprising young couples interested in making their new town a place to come to.

I am different, too. Older, of course; maybe a little wiser. I have seen a lot of the world outside of this corner of Virginia, and learned in some hard ways what it means to be part of the human condition. I’m no longer married, I’ve lost dear friends to disease, I’ve watched a lover die. My children live in far-away big cities now; the

A Weekend in Clifton Forge?

Ready to walk amid history and come back up in Clifton Forge this summer?

Here are a few places to stay:

RED LANTERN INN

314 Jefferson Avenue. 540-862-2027;
theredlanterninn.com

BANNON’S IRISH INN

412 E Ridgeway Street. 540-460-4440

HILLCREST BED & BREAKFAST

1100 McCormick Blvd. 385-201-4106

SMITH CREEK INN

811 Commercial Street. 540-620-6313;
thesmithcreekinn.com

FIRMSTONE MANOR

6209 Longdale Furnace Road. 540-862-0892;
firmstonemanor.com

Joan Vanorsdall stands on Pine Street overlooking the Town of Clifton Forge and the railyards that wind their way through the Allegheny Highlands.

The Masonic Amphitheater Bridge connects downtown Clifton Forge to the amphitheater and to the Clifton Forge School of the Arts, seen in the background.

preschoolers who were their friends have preschoolers of their own. I'm a grandmother now, and sometimes my knees hurt. Things change.

Can you go home again? Consider T.S. Eliot's take on that question in "Four Quartets":

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

Can you go home again? If, "at the end of all our exploring," we can return to see "the place for the first time," I think maybe so.

One final scene in the story. A few weeks after I returned to Clifton Forge, after my kitchen had been stripped bare at the start of renovation, I went to Jack Mason's Tavern with friends for dinner. For the third night and a few lunches in a row.

At the end of Ridgeway Street, the Tavern opened in 2009. By 6 o'clock most nights, it's standing room only. The food is that good, the beer selection that impressive, and the company that easy.

Behind the bar, one of the two owners smiled big. "Welcome home," she said. ☆



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