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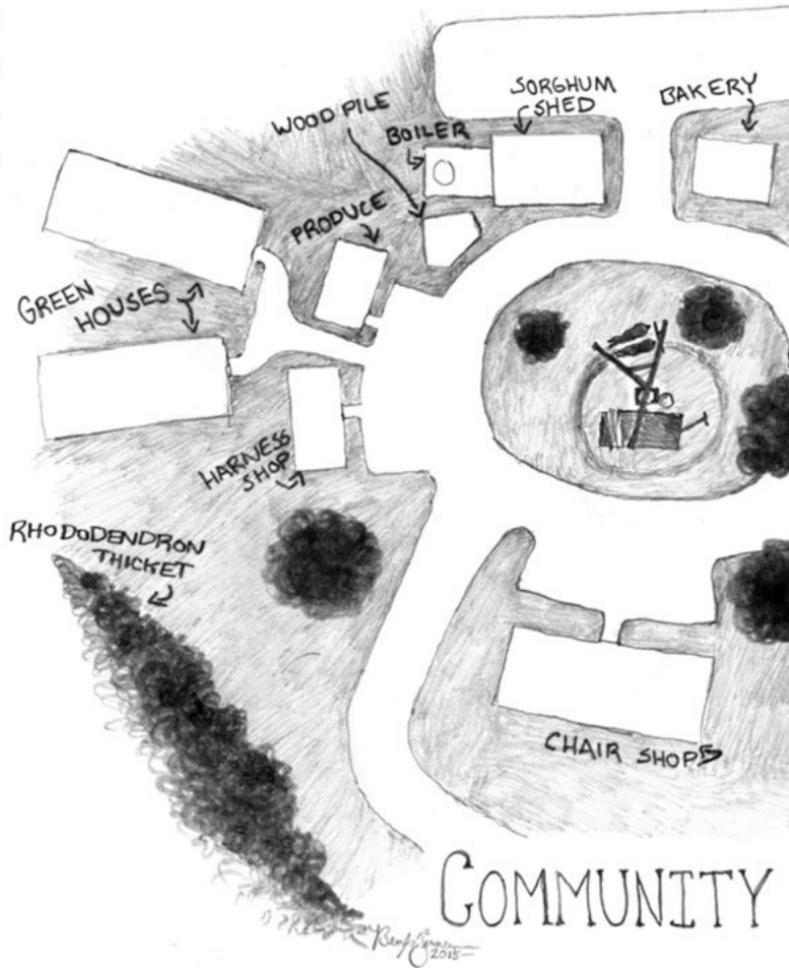
1.

Vernon Boggs

“I heard a rumor that you were practicing witchcraft up here,” Benjamin Miller said. “So I thought I’d give you a chance to prove the rumor wrong.”

Vernon Boggs said a quiet “Whoa” to his horses and stepped down from the sorghum wagon. “The Scriptures say, ‘Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft.’ What I practice up here is obedience, and since that’s the opposite of rebellion, I’d suppose it’s also the opposite of witchcraft. Wouldn’t you agree?”

The small southern Christian community of Hickory Stick was a favorite destination for people wanting to



show their children or grandchildren how things were done in the “old days.” Besides the bakery, general store, harness shop, produce market, greenhouses, restaurant and chair shop, there was, for two months in the fall, a steam-operated pan for cooking sorghum and a horse-powered press. It wasn’t the only sorghum



press in the community; it was situated in a circle between the other businesses strictly for the sake of the many visitors who came each fall just to watch the process. So the person who fed the cane into that press also had the very important job of communicating with the horses and the sightseers.

When the man who had performed that task for many years moved to be nearer his ailing elderly parents, no one in Hickory Stick could be found to replace him. Matthew Stoll, the owner of the harness shop, suggested that his bachelor uncle from a neighboring state might do the job well, and that's how Vernon Boggs ended up in Hickory Stick for the sorghum harvest.

But that still doesn't explain what he had done to start the rumor that he was practicing witchcraft.

Benjamin Miller, the elder at Hickory Stick Fellowship, didn't really suspect Vernon Boggs of doing anything wrong, but he also knew that to prove the rumor wrong he would have to see what was going on for himself.

"Do you mind if I watch awhile?" he said, settling into a rocker under the shade tree next to the press.

"Watching may be better than talking," Vernon responded with a smile. "I sometimes wonder if our best ears aren't actually our eyes."

Before long a group of tourists had assembled, watching Vernon feed long stalks of sorghum between the revolving wheels of the press. His team of horses, walking in a broad circle, turned a pole called the *sweep* that produced the power to crush the cane so that its juice ran out into a barrel. From there it went into a pipe that carried it under the road to the shed where it was cooked until it turned golden-brown and thick and sweet. It took nine gallons of juice to make

one gallon of sorghum syrup. So Vernon and his team of horses stayed busy crushing the cane.

Even so, if a visitor asked a question, Vernon always stopped his horses and hopped off the wagon to answer. Since the horses were walking in a circle around Vernon and the cane press, they couldn't be controlled by reins. So Vernon had trained them, as many farmers do, to respond to his voice. To stop them, he simply said, "Whoa." Now, that wasn't a mere suggestion, and his horses knew it; they also knew that it didn't mean "Take a short break and then do whatever you please." They stood patiently waiting until Vernon gave the next command.

