

Why I talk the way I talk

For those of you who have ever spoken with me, you are aware it takes me a while to say something, and all our faithful Yankee customers we serve have had a good laugh or two at my expense over the years, I'm sure. There's a good reason I talk the way that I do, but mainly because I am a southern boy from a once small town in eastern North Carolina, Knightdale. My mother, however, was a southern belle from the swamps of South Carolina near Lynches River, where the Swamp Fox, aka General Francis Marion, used to play hide and seek with British troops.

Lynches River was just down the road a bit from my Grandy's home and was where my Aunt Sarah took my cousins and me to swim every afternoon after playing in the black dirt, digging holes, and building forts. That river was to save precious well water and, of course, hot water. We always had ivory soap because it floated, as six to ten of us went to the river to clean up. We rode in the back of a pickup truck, and the driver was sure to blow the horn just in case any skinny dippers were having too much fun. After swimming and hollering like fools for an hour or so, we'd all ride back to the house, all 'squeaky-clean' and starving to death. Welches Jelly glasses and mason jars filled with fresh creamy milk from their cow, hot vegetables, 'possum' roast, fried squirrel, rabbits, with lots of milk gravy and hot biscuits with fresh-churned butter were waiting for us to sit down around the sizeable oval table. Just kidding, I ain't never had any 'possum,' but everything else I have. More like chicken, fried, of course, ham, greens that I hated immensely back then, and then the meal topped off with cake or pie from the old pie safe. All those folks down there sure did love them some grits, and we had grits or hominy every morning I was there.

Grandy's house was built back in the day when kitchens were in a separate building. Pa-Pa later added a modern kitchen onto the back of the house, and the original kitchen was storage by the time I hatched.

All the boys had guns by age twelve. Mine was my father's 20-gauge double-barrel Ithaca that kicked harder than my cousin's twelve-gauge...if I pulled both triggers on that antique of a gun at the same time, but I digress.

My father's Bride managed to attend ECTC, East Carolina Teachers College, but she never taught school except as a substitute occasionally, and she was always teaching me something at home. I was her baby boy and was watching her cook all the time. I knew how to make fudge by second grade, using a candy thermometer and all. She always corrected my grammar and stopped me from using 'git' rather than 'get. I wasn't allowed to say durn rather than darn and certainly not 'damn,' but I was learning all kinds of stuff/words that I wasn't supposed to know with two older brothers who spoke southern as well. With southern cousins to hang out with during the summers and Christmas, it's hard to shake a southern accent, and theirs were much different sounding from us city-slickers from Knightdale.

In my freshman year at UNC-CH, I was in the back of a lecture hall on day one with hundreds of other first-year students. When I asked the professor a question, everybody in that durn class

turned around to see what/who had said something that many probably couldn't understand anyway. I soon became very self-conscious, dropped that course, and added speech courses where I had some great instructors. Dr. Ted Barnes, Dr. Doll, and Dr. Charlie Coughlin, who later moved to Washington to work in linguistics for the CIA, and one I stayed in touch with whenever I was in Washington. During this time in college, my dream was to develop a 'standard dialect' so nobody could tell where I originated. All my professors cautioned me on that endeavor unless I wanted to be somebody else, and that wasn't my desire one bit.

My Bride was an English major at East Carolina, has a very standard dialect, and before I ruined her dialect, you couldn't tell she was a Yankee from Ohio because she loves grits as well as proper English. She has often corrected my grammar but hasn't bullied me too much over thirty-five years of marital bliss. My professors took away my twang and pushed me hard on diction but insisted my accent was too much of a part of me and who I am. When I used to go to NYC a lot for hell-raising many years ago, those folks up there would almost pay me to hear me talk, so I never understood why anybody had problems with New Yorkers. I guess they felt sorry for anyone who spoke as slowly as I did, but I always got anything I wanted or needed.

I'm still guilty of taking advantage of people who feel sorry for me. I used to extract their money when I worked the frontline at The Shrimp Connection for its first ten years. A one-hundred-dollar bill didn't stand a chance with me. We didn't take any cards until our sixth or seventh year, only checks and cash, including C-notes. I became very adept at getting most of that hefty bill. Our old-timers experienced the disappearance of their money, so some would go to an ATM to get smaller bills before visiting with us.

Currently, I'm not allowed to work frontline because I move too slow, talk too slow, and can't operate the fancy point-of-sale gadgets we use for each sale. Now I delegate and stay home to allow them to take care of you.

Landon E. Wilder 5-20-2021