

Applewhite, James: The Essences Of Things ^[1]

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James Applewhite: The Essences Of Things

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 3/11/2001. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Born in Stantonburg, in Wilson County, in 1935, James Applewhite is one of our nation's most acclaimed poets and an English professor at Duke University. At his home by the Eno River, he told me about his beloved grandfather, W.H. Applewhite. The story of his grandfather's life captures that moment around World War II when the South teetered between the old ways and the new, mules and tractors, a rural past and hell-bent future. It speaks to what was gained, and lost, in that world's passing.

In James Applewhite's words:



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During all the time I remember being still at home, my grandfather would make this kind of monthly procession down to Seven Springs to get his bottled water, and I would go with him. There was originally a hotel there, and it operated as a spring house. The owner of the spring and the hotel -- Gilbert Maxwell was his name -- would be there, and they had a regular ritual of cleaning out the bottles with a brush, rinsing them out with water they'd dip up with a big silver pitcher from places where I think I perceived it when I was a kid, without articulating it to myself, that this was part of the slightly set apart, sacramental way that my grandfather lived. During all the times I remembered him, he was living a life of pious retirement. He had a sort of Faulknerian fall had occurred during the Depression. The family story was that Capt. W.H. -- as he was sometimes called locally -- had not the heart to take people's land for debts, but that his bookkeeper, W.R. Rogers, was not so sure. We lived right across the street from my grandfather and his wife, so I was in and out as a kid just like a second home. He would spend a good part of every day reading his favorite passages from the Bible. He would be sitting there with his wife. He was extremely religious. On Friday or Saturday, he would walk the streets distributing Upper Rooms -- you know, the little Methodist pamphlet -- to, as we like to say, "widders and shut-ins." And he rigorously gave away a tenth of what he had. The house that he had built when he moved into town around 1910 was like a little bit of the farm brought into town, with the chicken yard and the garden. The things he did there seemed to me to have a kind of sacramental care about them. For me, it was a kind of a magical little world presided over by these two benign spirits who didn't talk a lot, but were very comforting in their stability. Having started the service station and garage, my father was always busy and in motion. He had faults -- I really believe they were opposed to change, both he and my grandmother. They kept a wood-burning range in the kitchen, long after everybody else in town had either an oil stove or an electric stove. They had an old woman there seemed something a little anachronistic about Capt. W. H. and Nannie, because the times were changing. If, in the older South, genteel poverty was a virtue, it was ceasing to be in the post-World War II era. Some of the other landowning My grandfather wasn't hard-handed in extracting money from the farm. He wasn't hard with his tenants. He didn't believe in any kind of investment more than a CD. Different people would have invested the money he gave away, and they would So they lived a fairly meager life. In the larger picture, it was because of the whole agrarian pattern coming out of the Depression, and his reluctance to adapt to new times -- not getting a tractor as soon as others. Or if you did get a tractor, you The attitude they gave to me was of ignoring modernity: resolutely living in what amounted to a kind of time capsule. On Sunday evenings, my dad and Aunt Virginia would be over there in the parlor, and Aunt Virginia would be playing hymns Like going to Seven Springs for water. The town water was perfectly good. It came out of a deep well. But to go down there and get this special water was part of a way of life that seemed to value the qualities and essences of things. When

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David Cecelski explores North Carolina's history, one person at a time.

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