



Sept, 30, 2017

I started noticing it in my 20s. If I didn't get into the mountains at least once a year, I'd feel a little stretched and hollow. It was in the mountains of Western North Carolina that I first heard a pipe and drum corps skirling and thundering gloriously off the high hills.

And, it felt deeply and strangely like coming home.

Genetic memory was a largely discredited idea for decades — until just the last year or so when researchers unlocked some of the deeper secrets of DNA and learned that some memories and traits can be passed down 14 generations or so.

My ties to Northern Ireland are a lot closer than that. Just six generations ago, a Belfast tailor named William McMillan sailed to Philadelphia and traveled down the Shenandoah Valley to southwest Virginia, where he became a farmer, Indian fighter and Overmountain Man.

He had plenty of company — 200,000 from Ulster. Called Ulster Scots or Scots-Irish, they were sick of heavy taxation by the British crown. Land and wide-open spaces beckoned in America.

They never looked back at their Scottish and Irish roots. They were too busy charging forward creating a new nation. Many of their descendants here today are unaware that they have roots in Ireland and Scotland.

My wife and I took our two Irish wolfhounds to Dandridge Saturday to the annual Scots-Irish Festival, where they're trying to remind Tennesseans of their history and where we topped off our tanks again on high country and bagpipng.

East Tennessee is a fitting place for such a gathering of the clans. The Scots-Irish heavily settled East Tennessee and gave it its particular, peculiar character.

The Scots Irish never considered themselves Irish. As a people they were only there about a hundred years. They'd been planted in Ulster by the England's King James when he cleared out the O'Neills and other combative Irish clans. It was the seeds of "the troubles" in Northern Ireland.

The tough and prickly Scots-Irish came from the lowlands and border country of Scotland, where they were "born fighting," writes former U.S. senator and Navy Secretary James Webb in his book of that name.

They brought that stubborn, pugnacious spirit when they fought the British, Cherokees and Creeks. Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett were Scots-Irish. They also had an inherent love of horses, hounds, music, whiskey and tobacco — and a decided anti-government sentiment.

My family's arc is the Scots-Irish arc —McMillans came down Virginia's "Irish Road" into East Tennessee at the Cumberland Gap, wheeled into Knoxville, then headed south through Chattanooga and ended up in North Alabama.

I have relatives in Texas, where 80 percent of the 189 men manning the ramparts of the Alamo were Scots-Irish. In that flat, hot, dusty place, their spirits were lifted by a Scottish piper, John McGregor.

McGregor "duelled" with Davy Crockett and his fiddle to see who could play the longest. McGregor did. Then, his pipes helped steel the defenders' nerve in the Mexican Army's final charge. The defiant wailing was one of the last sounds they heard...

An old sound, a raucous, primordial sound...music locked into the fibers of their DNA. The sound of home, calling...