

The Chicken Barn Road: Field of Spoons

During the years my wife Melanie and I lived in North Carolina, we became familiar with a very special place we refer to as the Chicken Barn Road. Every Sunday morning we took our dogs and went on a 2 to 3 hour walk near Falls Lake, or occasionally a canoe ride. The lake, actually a reservoir, lies in a rural area and has miles of shoreline to explore—especially convenient when the water is low. This road—more like a dirt lane—was probably our favorite place to walk. It skirts an arm of the lake, and runs for over a mile through farm fields, forests, and abandoned graveyards. Signs of the areas rich history are everywhere, and the chicken barns—situated at the north end of the road—are part of that history.

This past June we left Connecticut to visit our old stomping grounds, and one of our first stops was a stroll down this road. We parked our rental in front of one of the deserted chicken barns and cracked the windows—it promised to be hot and humid, a typical summer day in North Carolina. We were excited to get started, having many fond memories of being here with our dogs, now both gone, who would run about with joyous abandon. The first section of road dipped slightly, its surface marked by stony gullies. We

followed it through a patch of woods until we came to what we call the north field—the field of spoons—and then we got busy.

The history of human habitation in this area stretches back to the Neolithic age. Evidence for the Indians presence exists in the form of artifacts comprised of stone or clay. On past walks we've found many of these underfoot, as well as pieces of petrified wood—relics of a time at least 200 million years before humans existed on the planet. Intermixed with the above, we've found more recent artifacts—bits of iron, glass, and china from White or Black settlers—and many bent and twisted spoons.

As we searched the field in the muggy heat, we saw a few stone tools, but on this particular morning, no spoons. The presence of a nearby mental health hospital, along with the chicken barns, helps explain the mystery of the spoons. This area had been part of a large army training base in the early forties. After the war, the state kept some of the land—along with the base hospital—and converted it into an institute to treat psychiatric patients. Part of their therapy was to help operate a farm—hence the chicken barns. I surmise they ate lunch in the fields on occasion, and then lost their spoons. No forks or knives were found—perhaps they were banned. The spoons must have become deformed from getting hit and dragged by plows, disks, and rakes. The acronym SHB is stamped

on the back of each spoon handle—State Hospital Butner? The farming operations ended in the late 1980s.

Further down the road Melanie discovered a few more stone artifacts, while I took refuge in a nearby graveyard, dappled with the shade from several oak trees. We arrived at the next graveyard, a very small plot with only a few remaining headstones, and a place we call the knoll field. It's a former Indian camp and a place of home sites for the white settlers who came later. (One day we found the remains of a circular stone well in the raked dirt.) I wonder if the settlers also found Indian artifacts and petrified wood—and what they thought of them. It's amazing to imagine such a massive sweep of history—now reduced to fragments, jumbled together at our feet.

We were pretty sweaty by noon, but happy to have returned—and to find the area hadn't changed much. A few years back, I took the spoons we had previously collected and transformed them into a wind chime. I gave it to my mom as a gift, but she wouldn't hang it outdoors—she said it's too nice, so she hung it in the house. Her great grandchildren sometimes play with it—attracted to the colors, and then by the swinging, clanging spoons.

For pictures, see the image gallery.