

## ***It Still Lives***

Season 3, Episode 7: Meet the Morgans

Kami Ahrens (KA)

Lilly Knoepp (LK)

Foxfire (FF)

Rufus Morgan (RM)

Louise Morgan Runyon (LR)

KA: Hello and welcome everybody, you're listening to *It Still Lives*, the Foxfire podcast, where we take you on a journey through Southern Appalachian History one story at a time. I'm Kami, your host and today I have a very special guest with me.

LK: I'm Lilly Knoepp, I'm the regional reporter for Blue Ridge Public Radio, so I cover Western North Carolina past Asheville. We have, you know, a very cool project together that we're gonna talk about with you today.

KA: Yeah, so Lilly and I met, what was that, last May? So almost a year now. Lilly reached out to Foxfire because she was really interested in the Covid Oral History Crowd-Sourced Project that we launched back in March 2020, and as a reporter, Lilly was interested in ways that we could collaborate together to collect stories. And I'm happy to say that because of her efforts and efforts of other members of the BPR team, we were able to officially launch that partnership in March of this year, in honor of the anniversary of the pandemic.

LK: Yeah, so together with Foxfire, we're working to collect oral histories about the covid-19 pandemic from people across Appalachia, just sharing stories, memories, anything about this last year.

KA: Our very first submission of 2021 came from a woman named Louise Morgan Runyon, who is a poet who lives in Western North Carolina. And her submission has kind of taken us down a rabbit hole, I think is fair to say.

LK: Absolutely.

KA: So Louise happens to be related to both Rufus and Lucy Morgan, who are pretty pivotal figures in Western North Carolina history. Which has kind of brought us to today, we are currently sitting at St. John's Episcopal Church in Cartoogechaye, which is part of Franklin, North Carolina. We're sitting outside in what I believe is the outdoor service area, but is also directly adjacent to the graveyard.

LK: We have just pulled up here at St. John's Episcopal Church and we're about to go check it out. \*footsteps crunching on gravel\* So it looks like there's an outdoor service area over here under the biggest hemlock tree I personally have ever seen. And then you walk under this beautiful bell tower to this paneled church. Do you want to go up to Rufus Morgan's grave?

KA: Yeah.

\*Footsteps on gravel\*

LK: There's dogwoods--oh there's a butterfly on the azalea bush, a couple, of course. We have this stone on top, which says it was put here in 1977.

KA: Yeah, he actually selected his own headstone. He brought this rock down. So it's really worn and covered in lichen, but you can read at the very base, it says "Thanks be to God who gives us his victory." Just says Albert Rufus Morgan, 1885 to 1983. So I went out and interviewed Louise personally, because she had sent us some of her poetry. And we really wanted to get some audio of it, because really great pieces that capture the impact of the pandemic. And as I sat down with her, the conversation went far beyond her poetry into an hour-long interview about her history, her family history, which then in turn led us to want to know more about both Rufus and Lucy. And I think what we saw coming out of that was something much larger. Rufus Morgan is the great-grandchild of William Siler, who was a member of the Siler family. Now Lilly, could you just share with us what you know about the Silers? I think you can summarize it better than I can.

LK: Absolutely. So the Silers are kind of one of the big founding families of Franklin, really. 5:45\* So we kind of trace it back to William Siler. William Siler moved into Cartoogechaye, here, into this valley. And then Jacob bought up the next valley. John bought up the next valley. And then Jesse moved to Franklin. So that sort of, like, explains a little bit about how early the Silers came in and there are a lot of stories about their relationships with the Cherokee here at this site at the Episcopal church.

KA: The reason that we chose to record to record here today at St. John's Episcopal Church is because the land was given by his grandparents, this is where he was baptized, but the church was actually torn down in 1925. But it was a personal mission of Rufus to come back here and rebuild this church and to rebuild the community and this became really his special project until his death.

LK: You know, that's sort of a lot of the themes that we're going to talk about here today that kind of connects Louise and Rufus--community, establishing these really special places in the Appalachian Mountains that are still important today, whether it's the Appalachian Trail or this beautiful church.

KA: Yeah, and definitely there seems to be this family mission of preserving the landscape and preserving the wilderness for future generations. And it's certainly something Rufus was incredibly passionate about and I think Louise has developed a passion for as well. I think their missions and their accomplishments speak to maybe some of the things that maybe we should be focusing on during this pandemic. And I think, you know, the shutdowns have forced everyone to stop and really think about our relationship with technology and our relationship

with the global culture and to refocus ourselves to be rooted more in place and to be rooted more in the outdoors and to find, you know, more meaningful connections through in-person relationships.

LK: Yeah, I mean, in my reporting this year, I think it's been really clear that, just from a numbers perspective, more people are getting outside and hiking. When you look at the numbers for the Great Smoky Mountains, for the Parkway, for all--I mean, Black Rock State Park where Foxfire is--people have wanted to get outside in a way that was safe during covid. So if you have stories that you want to share with us about what being outside at this time has meant to you, please, reach out.

KA: Absolutely.

FF: We're ready to go out and interview Reverend Rufus Morgan. January 16th, 1974.

RM: Well, I don't know where to start except for where I started. My great-grandfather, William Siler, settled over across the valley, over here, about 1818. And the story goes that his house was the first house in Macon County that had windows. I remember the house quite well. It was a long, two-story log house. Porch was upstairs and down, the whole length of the house. My parents were married in '81 and my oldest sister was born there I think in that house in '82. And I was born there in 1885. I was baptized in the church, according to the record. I don't think I told you about my present love; it has been my love ever since I was born: St. John's Cartoogechaye. I don't know whether you have time for that story or not.

FF: Well, I expect Margie back in a little bit. If you wanted to, you could go ahead and start into it.

RM: The first church that they undertook to build was right across from where he lived. My grandparents gave the land--2 acres. Afterward, they built various other churches, one in Franklin, one in Highlands, one in Cowee. But the congregation was neglected out here. The building was in bad repair and the church authorities allowed it to be torn down. People just supposed it would go back to wilderness and that would be that. Well I was in South Carolina then and I heard that the church authorities were planning to sell the land where the church had been. I wrote to them and asked them please not to sell it, but if they did, give me the chance of buying it. I protested and so they didn't. I started whenever I could get away, before I moved up here, clearing out the underbrush and dreaming of building a church back. I started the building and we held our first services there in 1945.

The first four years, I did work way back in the mountains. Then some events came up that I just couldn't continue that particular job, so I went down to South Carolina, had 3 small churches, neighboring towns. And during that time, there was that flu epidemic of the First World War. The school authorities where I was living--Barnwell--were without a principal at the high school, so they asked me to pitch in for them. I said, "Well, provided you get a man just as soon as possible." Well, for the whole year they didn't find anybody else. Workers were scarce. So I did

the church work and the school work together. And during the flu epidemic, I ministered through the Red Cross and saw more people die, I think, that year than I have in all the rest of my life.

There are various things that are of interest to me. One is that a few years ago, I realized that people would wonder--people in my family--would wonder what kind of a marker to put at my grave. And so I decided to decide for them. And I got a lovely stone back in the mountains and got the monument men to put the lettering on it and erect the stone where I want to be buried.

FF: What brought you back here to this house, to Macon County?

RM: Because, well what brought me back was my heart. My mother loved it intensely, my grandparents loved it. My great-grandparents loved it and well it's just inbred. And I have loved it all my life. When we used to come back and forth from Cherokee County over here, the county line--Macon County and Cherokee--is marked and when we'd get to that county line coming this way, we would get down and kiss the earth. We just loved it so. When we was going the other way, we would get down and kiss Macon County goodbye.

But it's just all in my blood. And I watched my grandfather here in his post office there in the corner, tending to the mail. And I've loved these white oaks in the yard, three lovely ones, here, here and here. And the hemlocks. Well, to me, it's just too beautiful for words. They succeeded in spoiling some of it, like building the roads, but they can't take away the mountain as they stretch along here. Of course in later years, there's been added the Appalachian Trail, part of which goes along old Indian trails, but, well I can't express it. Somebody will have to prove that it isn't as lovely as I think it is before I'll be convinced.

FF: You're pretty well satisfied then with everything else?

RM: Yes.

FF: I can see why.

RM: These last years, since 1940 to 1974, I've been particularly happy. Both within the church and in my relationship to other people, in my activities that I've been able to carry on, climbing of mountains, studying God's hand in his creation. And increasing number of friends--it's all been very lovely.

FF: Well what about all the progress that's been made since, say 1940. Do you agree with all that or do you wish things were still back in say the simpler times? Has the progress made a great change in your life? Say, take the highway out here for instance that they're building, how do you feel towards this?

RM: That distresses me and all that goes with it. I've sometimes said that I wish a bulldozer had never been invented. I can say that with a good deal of conviction. There's so much in our present world that distresses me because it seems to me that the emphasis on the part of

modern man is exactly contrary to the standards of Christ. I've been on the radio this week for morning devotions, the local station, and I took the very simplest thing that I could think, which is the Lord's Prayer. This morning I spoke on the petition for material things. "Give us this day our daily bread." Not overflowing bins, not millions of tons for our own profit, but give us, the people who need, everywhere, and let us realize that it's given to us to supply their need. We're beginning to discover we can't satisfy our needs. It's all a result of man's being completely occupied in the thing that Christ told us not to do. And of course it leads to the downgrading in our estimation of God's creation. We come up against the situation that we have where we've just been overreaching ourselves, cheating ourselves by going too fast, too far. Well I hope we'll wake up in time and in the meantime I walk along the trails in the Smoky Mountains National Park and my companion stops and he said, "Listen to the silence." When we had left the bulldozers, other machinery, speeding cars down here, go up there where there's peace.

LR: I'm Louise Morgan Runyon and I live in Jackson County, North Carolina. And I moved here only two years ago, but I have come up to this place for my entire life. All of my family is from here and has been here for eight generations as they like to say. And, so it's always been my plan and my dream to return to these mountains. My grandfather, Ralph Siler Morgan Sr.--the first--was Lucy and Rufus's brother. And there were three other children that lived, I believe, and I think three that died. I grew up in the mountains--in New York City and in the mountains of North Carolina. My mother was born in Brevard and every summer I came to live with my aunt and uncle at Penland. My great-aunt Lucy founded Penland school. And my aunt and uncle Louise and John Morgan had a house there, and from ages three to thirteen, I was with them every summer. So I did quite a bit of poetry writing in the '80s and then I started using text in dance, so my writing kind of went into that. And then in, around the year 2000, my writing really took on a life of its own, my poetry.

My older son is a journalist and he's, at the moment, in Brazil in the Amazon. He's writing a National Geographic article about a group in the Amazon, a group of farmers who are trying to reforest the Amazon. My other son has been a park ranger for about ten or twelve years. They came here on a regular basis; we all came here on a regular basis when they were growing up. You know, they were very much introduced to the outdoors and the mountains and to nature. My older son Brian felt particularly connected to North Carolina and the mountains and to Uncle Rufus, his great-great uncle. And that's one of the poems I have, in fact.

My aunt loved the mountains deep, deep in her heart. All the family does. But my mother somewhat less so, as a New Yorker. I mean she does, she did, but not in that way. So my aunt really taught me to love the mountains and taught me to love, and identify flowers and plants. And there was Aunt Lucy who was, you know, a great inspiration in terms of craft. My family really valued craft. And my uncle, my Aunt Louise's husband, was an artist. And he, you know, kind of gave me my first experience of what it meant to be an artist. I didn't become a visual artist, but I did become an artist. So that was just pivotal for me. And coming up here, we did a lot of hiking. And you know, seeing crafts and hearing about, hearing old stories and I think it had a profound effect on them.

So I knew Lucy growing up. She--children were not allowed at Penland so I was the exception. And there was a little girl who lived down just almost next door to us who was my good friend. And we were the only, well, she had brothers. But we were the only children there. So she wasn't really into children. I didn't have a close personal relationship with her. My aunt did. But I certainly knew her and she always had a twinkle in her eye that I have never seen replicated in any photograph or any drawing or any painting. They never have done her justice, as far as I can tell. She was very determined, very wrinkled, very humorous. I felt surrounded by the goodness of people in the mountains. And you know, people are good and bad everywhere and that's true here too, but there was something about the people there that was so kind and solid to me. It was balm. You know, being at Penland was just balm.

This is where my heart is. This is my place.

So the first poem I'll read is about Uncle Rufus, in a way, partly. And it begins with a dream. It's called "Infusion." One: Pushing against the edge of sleep. An off-white art paper box. Rice paper or cotton rag. Four cubes making one, only one square surface seen. Across the four, a charcoal drawing. A dust of mountains, a horizon. Sky. Toward the beginning of my waking, crowding me out of my sleep, some soft ink begins at that center. Seeps, infuses the mountains with green. Two: Long ago at Penland, deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains, outdoors and free standing, the craftsman's shrine. An upside-down U flat at the top, built with squared corners of native rock. And my great-uncle Rufus with snow-white hair, standing like an arrow in long, white robes, head toward heaven, arms spread low. Palms facing out in an upside-down V. "I lift mine eyes up unto the hills," he said, "from whence cometh my help. From whence cometh my strength. From whence cometh balm. I lift mine eyes up unto the hills," he said at sunset. And we did. Three: My firstborn son was born on the same birthday as Uncle Rufus. What color was Uncle Rufus's hair? He asked as an adult. What color was Uncle Rufus's hair? His own so red, now reddish brown. And so we had to ask. "Why, white," everyone said. "White." Even those who had known him young. But someone thought, just maybe, that one time it had been red.

So this is about the pandemic. It's called "Where is Our Prague Spring?"

Where is the tango, the close embrace, so far gone now?

Where is the waltz traveling in tandem, the cajun two-step? It's complicated wrapping of the arms around each other's waists. Where is the rolling around on the floor with other dancers, the taking of someone's full weight over my back. The lifting, the flying, the tumbling. The puppy pile of humans. That dance. Where is my 25-year marriage? When was the last time I was touched? Where are the faces, the mouths, the noses, the chins? Except for my son's or someone on the other side of the street, gone. Say their names. Where is the face beneath the mask, beneath the hat, the sunglasses, the face shield? I forget to look in anyone's eyes if they are wearing a mask. Who's face can I see now except on the Zoom screen. And there, making eye contact is tricky. Where is the holding of hands, the touching of cheeks, the common breath. Where is our Prague spring, our Dubcek, that flowering of art and government, of commonality and uniqueness that was so brutally crushed? I was there on the other side in the Soviet Union in 1968, in those hours before the morning we flew out we heard Soviet Planes all night long flying out of Kiev. What was that about? Arriving in Vienna, we found out, people escaped from

Czechoslovakia strapped to the underneath of rail cars. It would be 1989 before a new flowering there. The Velvet Revolution. Where is our Velvet Revolution? Our Prague Spring? Or as in Estonia, our singing revolution. Where is our Enlightenment, our Age of Science, our Renaissance? Our Age of Reason, our golden era? In this strange age, I live in a fishbowl house of fog. On humid mornings, as mornings here almost all are, the bare trees of winter extend their black limbs through the silvery fogscape. On the few dry mornings, the brown mountains can be seen as the sun rises, shedding light on the few remaining red leaves. The wild turkeys that cross my path. Eleven of them, moving so slowly, fully grown, their browns and reds and greens and navy blues are muted in the woods. It is almost Thanksgiving Day. These eleven hopefully will survive. At any time of day, one may hear shooting in the woods. I have to ignore it. Oh, that.

KA: I was immediately struck by this poem, I don't know about what your initial thoughts of it were, Lilly. But I, you know, it's, she describes it as a cry, a cry for help, a cry for touch, and I certainly felt that reading it. But I also felt that--I actually asked her about this and she said it wasn't conscious, but I really feel that there's a message about how art can heal us coming through this poem. And that art and connection will really build us back up as a culture.

LK: Absolutely, and I feel like, you know, all these little pieces, you know, about the masks and covering your eyes and covering your face and, you know, living inside of a "fishbowl in a house of fog"--I felt that.

KA: Yeah, it's very relatable.

LK: And you know, I live in the mountains--I live in Sylva and so you really were in this little fishbowl of yourself, with yourself, and so it's, I think it's something that people, will take everyone back to the pandemic and really illustrate this time of isolation that I think everyone is still processing.

KA: Absolutely, and I, you know, she refers to a "flowering." She hearkens back to the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution and even back to the Renaissance. And I think a lot of us probably felt that, that our lives had become kind of colorless, we'd be drained of a lot of creativity, and a lot of imagination. And I think that was true at first, but I have seen just an incredible outpouring of art as people have accepted our situation and have responded to it positively and creatively. So, I do think that a flowering has come out of this in some regard and certainly right now it's hard to look around and deny that there's a flowering in our lives right now as we're surrounded by these beautiful irises and azaleas.

So we hoped you've enjoyed and been able to follow us along on this journey from, you know, the early days of Franklin and Macon County, walking alongside Rufus Morgan as he explores these hills to the present day with Louise returning back to these mountains and joining and kind of writing her part on that family legacy. If you want to read more about Rufus, there is a very long, very well-written chapter in *Foxfire 4* and I highly recommend it if you are a Western North Carolina resident. It has just so much information about the region. He seems to have been connected to everything in some way or another. And certainly jump over to [bpr.org](http://bpr.org) to check out

the work Lilly and her coworkers have been doing to document the pandemic and the material they've been sharing from Foxfire as part of our collaborative oral history project.

And if you are interested in sharing your own pandemic story or anything that you've experienced over the past year, whether you want to share an oral history, a poem, an art piece, a picture--anything that really captures your experience, anything that will have meaning and has an impact on you, just head on over to [foxfire.org/covid19/](https://foxfire.org/covid19/). There's information on how to submit your materials or you can send us an email and that's [covidhistory@foxfire.org](mailto:covidhistory@foxfire.org)

So thank you so much for joining me today Lilly.

LK: Thank you for having me.

KA: We'll talk to you all next time.

\*outro music plays\*