
PINEY RIDGE TRILOGY: JANICE HOLT GILES'S ESSAY OF PLACE

Clara L. Metzmeier
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Kent C. Ryden

The social history of rural Adair County, Kentucky in the 1930s and 1940s unfolds as one reads Janice Holt Giles's *The Enduring Hills* (1950), *Miss Willie* (1951), and *Tara's Healing* (1951), the novels that comprise the Piney Ridge Trilogy. Giles brings the reader to Piney Ridge by using detailed descriptions of the landscapes and by accurate reporting of the traditions and life styles of the people. Giles provides continuity of plot and setting by developing some of the same characters throughout the three novels and by constructing a literary map of Piney Ridge that includes roads, houses, woods, and hills. She adds reality and history to this map by labeling each place with the name of the owner or the purpose of the building. Because her map includes such intimate details, it is different from a highway map or a map in a geography book. When the reader studies Giles's map, memories of Piney Ridge people recur, and a sense of place "gradually and unconsciously" forms.

The little square marked "Hod Pierce" on the Piney Ridge Map, for example, calls up more than just a house located on Whispering Creek. The reader remembers that in *The Enduring Hills*, Hod and Mary Pierce decide after the close of World War II and after a few years of working in Louisville, Kentucky, that they would live on Piney Ridge, the home of Hod's family for seven generations. The reason Hod and Mary believe it is necessary for Hod to return to his childhood home after many years' absence is that both seek a balance between their place of residence and their spiritual needs. The reader recalls that *The Enduring Hills* ends when Hod takes Mary to see Grandpa Dow's house and states that this old log building will be their home. The reader further recalls that Hod often visited Grandpa Dow, who had talked a lot about life on the Ridge, about the Pierce clan, and about reasons why the Ridge folks lived the way they did. The reader remembers that it is in the Hod Pierce house that many people begin their lives on the Ridge. Miss Willie and Tara Cochrane first live in Hod's and Mary's home when they come to the Ridge; Jeems Pierce, the first child of Hod and Mary, is born in the old log home. Thus the house, becomes a focal point for a multi-generational and multi-cultural family. The old log home helps to establish the thread that weaves through the three books: the influence of geographical location on cultural heritage and of heritage on an individual or a group of individuals. Giles helps readers to focus upon the landscape, the people, and the relationships formed between place of residence and people.

As Giles conducts a tour up and down Gaptown Pike, she stops at the mill and the school and in many houses and fields so that the reader can listen to the people's conversations and come to know them. The reader learns that these are farm families who depend upon tobacco as the main money crop, that the people are poor and uneducated, and that medical treatment is minimal. Electricity and indoor plumbing do not exist in rural Adair County in the 1930s and early 1940s. Most of the people travel around the Ridge on foot or in horse or mule drawn

wagons, and they seldom travel further than The Gap. Isolated by geography, ignorance, and poverty, the people form a close-knit community. Their love of place and the security it gives them keeps them on the Ridge. There they stoically and fatalistically accept their hardships.

The Piney Ridge folks of the 1930s and 1940s accept their hardships with the "Hits allus been" attitude, often expressed in *Miss Willie*, but they are not a dismal people. They make their fun much as America's pioneer families did. They have house- and barn-raising, church dinners and singings, and pie suppers at the beginning of the school term. These functions give the people a chance to see each other and escape from drudgery into fun; they give young couples a chance to hug waists and to steal kisses. Food, the traditional sign of hospitality, is always served at these functions. The Ridge folks usually bring beans of different varieties, fried chicken, potatoes, homemade bread, and pies. The women sometimes make a social event of their sewing and mending jobs, visiting on the porch in the summer or by the fire in the winter, while they mend clothes or make quilts. The men often gather at the mill to swap news and to tell stories while the grain is being ground into flour. Such was the case when the men at the mill pay tribute to Grandpa Dow in *The Enduring Hills*. In *Tara's Healing* the men tell stories at the house raising. Gault's story of Grandpa's throwing a corn cob at an old Tom turkey tricks Tara into asking what happened to the turkey. Tara's question is the point of the story. Thus the men guffaw and slap each other on the back and tease Tara for "biting hook, line, and sinker." This episode is typical of Ridge humor. Folks have their special ways to escape the never-ending farm labor.

Janice Holt Giles did not grow up in rural Adair County, but Henry, her husband, did. He told her many of the stories about Knifley, Giles Ridge, and Caldwell Ridge that enter into her Piney Ridge Trilogy. In fact, the story of Hod and Mary Pierce as it is written in *The Enduring Hills* parallels Henry's and then Janice's and Henry's lives. Janice, like Mary Pierce, visited the Ridge many times before she moved there. She slowly learned the established customs, the sayings, and the habits of the people. Eudora Welty, in her well-known essay "[Place in Fiction](#)," says that place is like a brimming frame. Point of view, according to Welty, is "a product of personal experience and time . . . and the imagination," causing the writer to see his or her picture and the world's picture superimposed in the frame of place. Welty believes the writer works best when he or she is aware of the relationship between the two [\(8\)](#). Giles's knowledge of place gained over a period of time from her many visits to Adair County and from Henry's accounts of his life on the Ridge, enriched by her interpretation of the place and its people, allows her to write as Welty recommends. Folklorist Lynwood Montell agrees, stating in "[Folklore in the Works of Janice Holt Giles](#)" that Giles's works accurately preserve "in literature certain folk elements of the culture of south central Kentucky that may never again be interpreted by a writer so familiar with the land and its people" [\(42\)](#). Giles's description of Piney Ridge and her presentation of the Ridge people show how geographic location shapes the cultural practices of a people and how the people relate to those practices in order to develop a history of the place.

The opening paragraphs of *The Enduring Hills* introduce the reader to a young Hod Pierce working before breakfast in the cornfield. The scene could be a painting, with the rising sun, the young boy in a blue work shirt, the young corn in a field on top of a ridge bordered by a pine tree, silver poplar trees, and a hickory nut tree with a wood thrush. Giles's verbal description of the Ridge continues to be as vivid as the opening scene. It shows how the lay of the land informed the lives of the people who lived there many years ago and how it controlled the kind of people who settled there.

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Piney Ridge is so rocky and thorny and the community is so isolated that the reader easily understands why Hod is anxious to leave the Ridge and perhaps wonders why he wishes to return. *The Enduring Hills* offers a clue when Hod returns home on a furlough. Nothing was changed: "The rocks are just as sharp, the trees are just as old, the hills are just as steep" (162). The white birch in which he had carved his initials many years ago is still there, mockingbirds still sing and blue jays still squawk. As Hod walks on toward his house, he notices familiar trees and places. When he sees his house he is overcome with emotion. The house too is unchanged. Because the scenery is unchanged, Piney Ridge gives Hod a sense of identity and stability. He knows that he can return to his people who have always lived on Piney Ridge and that he will always be welcome because he is one of them.

Giles's description of winter and spring in *Miss Willie* helps the reader to picture the beauty of rural Kentucky in the 1930s and 1940s. Tara Cochrane, in *Tara's Healing*, is invigorated by the cold winter night and the December night sky. The description is so real that the reader, like Tara, is "transfixed in the atmospheric cold" (104). Like Tara, Miss Willie is carried away by the physical beauty of these isolated hills and she philosophizes that if a place can be so beautiful, surely the people are beautiful too.

The people of Piney Ridge are also beautiful in many ways, but outsiders have to search for this beauty. Matt Jasper, the pathetic, epileptic young man in *The Enduring Hills* who frightened Mary Hogan, is transformed into a beautiful person when he sings "And I, If I Be Lifted Up, Will Draw All Men Unto Me" at the ice cream social (*Miss Willie*). Wells Pierce, a weathered outdoorsman, is a beautiful person because of his kindness to and sensitivity for other people (*Miss Willie*). Jory Clark is spiritually a beautiful person (*Tara's Healing*). The loveliness of scenery can be seen when passing through a place, but the loveliness of the people can be experienced only by living and working in a place. Piney Ridge, like any other community, has crisis situations which tend to bring out the best in people. Sickness within a family such as Tom's appendectomy, Grandpa Dow's final illness (*The Enduring Hills*), and Hattie's long illness and death (*Tara's Healing*) call upon all members of the Pierce clan to do the chores for the sick person and to help the family care-givers. Happy times such as a shivaree and a house-raising call for a community celebration; tragedies, such as Matt Jasper's murder-suicide which leaves several orphaned children, call for community response. Fredy Jones's successful rehabilitation from alcoholism depends upon the patience and concern of several people.

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