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

Clara L. Metzmeier  
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A sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing a history within its confines.

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-raisings, 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.

Piney Ridge is the backbone of a knobby, stony, almost barren line of hills, lying in a remote and neglected section of South Central Kentucky. A gravel pike winds through their jutting lower slopes, but roads back into the hills are little more than trails. Green River cuts a deep gash in the hills, but for a space after it leaves the hills, it flows gently and placidly. In the rich bottoms, the land stretches black and loamy on either side. Piney Ridge rises like a
hogs back from the litter of low clustering hills, and broods timelessly over old Green. Clinging to the rocky ledges, the thin level tops, and the deep-scarred hollows of Piney Ridge are the descendants of a resolute man who pushed past the great wall of the hills and settled himself and his wife behind it. This resolute man was Thomas Pierce, who had received "600 acres of land near or about Wandering Creek in the territory of Kentucky" (11) as payment for his services in the Continental Army.

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.

Some of the crises on Piney Ridge could have been prevented if proper education and medical facilities had been available. However, they were not. When an area such as Piney Ridge in the 1930s and 1940s lacks such facilities, the people are dependent upon subsistence farming, moonshining, and crafts to make a living. Because currency is in short supply, the community has only what the community provides for itself. Few if any professionals go there; natives seldom leave the area because they are not prepared for the outside world. If a Ridge person does leave, he seldom returns. Hod and Mary Pierce are certainly among the exceptions. The Ridge folks are suspicious of outsiders. Mary is accepted into the community because she is Hod's wife. Miss Willie is accepted because she is Mary's aunt and because she finally marries a Pierce. Tara is accepted because of the wartime friendship with Hod. Sarah Pierce's chance to study outside the community is an opportunity that rarely presents itself to Ridge people.

The location of Piney Ridge caused educational and economic isolation, which led Ridge folks to develop sayings
peculiar to the area. Giles accurately incorporates local sayings into the conversations of the people. In *Tara's Healing*, "It had been a time and a time" is used to mean "for a long time" (166). In *Miss Willie* the expression "they'd jist got spliced" meaning "just married" is heard in conversation (194), as is "get in behind that young man" meaning "give him a spanking" (172).

The geographical isolation of the Ridge caused some people to turn to a rather fatalistic kind of religion as represented by the faith healers, the group to which John and Irma Walton belong. On the other hand, the Church of the Brethren in Christ or White Caps, as they are locally called, are a small congregation of worshipers on Piney Ridge who approach life through active service rather than fatalistic acceptance. Jory Clark lives out the doctrines of the White Caps.

The isolation of the Ridge folks causes them not to trust outsiders and to prefer the old ways. Miss Willie is constantly frustrated by the folks' acceptance of customs because they have always been done that way. Some of the customs such as the older boys playing pranks on the new school teacher and the women serving the men their meals and then eating their own meals, Miss Willie has to accept. These practices really do not harm any person on the Ridge. However, other customs such as leaving the spring at the schoolhouse uncovered and not listening to new ideas of good nutrition do prove harmful to the Ridge community. Giles tells in *The Enduring Hills* of Hod Pierce's rejecting an opportunity to go to Officers' Candidate School because his poor education makes him feel inferior to the other men. He feels that he is a successful sergeant and that he must stay in that position rather than accept promotion and risk possible failure. His "ridge attitude" robs him of an opportunity to better himself. Hattie dies because she does not want to change. She keeps her old eating habits and chooses not to have surgery. "Hits allus been done this way" and "It's the Lord's will" are two stock replies to an outsider's pleas for change.

In *The Enduring Hills*, *Miss Willie*, and *Tara's Healing*, Janice Holt Giles adopts the strategy recommended by Floyd Watkins. Like most good fiction writers, Giles "provides clutter of a world accurate for the knowing reader and yet clear to the reader who does not know the time and Place" (15). In particular, Giles documents the Ridge people's traditions of hunting and singing the foods they eat. She also documents their traditions of funerals and marriages and river baptisms. She records methods of transportation, superstitions and folk medicine. She talks about the tradition of making moonshine and the community attitudes toward moonshiners and revenuers. Giles also tells of subsistence farmers picking tomatoes in Indiana and working in lumber camps or on WPA projects during the Depression years in order to earn desperately needed cash.

In the 1930s and 1940s, hard work and a close-knit community helped the Piney Ridge people survive and overcome, to some extent, financial crisis, war, poverty, and ignorance. The emotional stability that comes to people when they balance their place of residence with their spiritual life is as desired in contemporary America as it was then. Kent C. Ryden believes that sense of place makes literary works solid and significant: "[P]laces, or our understanding of and attachment to vanished places, sometimes feel like all that is solid in a world of change, all that is undiminished value in a world of maddening flux (95). This is the true value of Janice Holt Giles's Piney Ridge Trilogy.

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**Works Cited**


Janice Holt Giles was a Kentucky author who lived near Knifley in Adair County, Kentucky. She was born Janice Meredith Holt on March 28, 1909, in Altus, Arkansas. Her works include the Piney Woods trilogy, consisting of "The Enduring Hills" (1950), "Miss Willie" (1951), and "Tara's Healing" (1952), and the Kentucky trilogy, consisting of "The Kentuckians" (1953), "Hannah Fowler" (1956), and "The Believers" (1957). The Janice Holt Giles and Henry Giles Society was established in 1996 to preserve the literary legacy of Janice Holt Giles and Henry Giles and to restore their log home. Giles's historical fiction works form a worthy study of early American pioneer life in Virginia, Tennessee Pbm O&icLi Janice Holt Giles Foreword by Dianne Watkins. The university press of kentucky. According to Giles, the theme of The Plum Thicket is that "heritage and environment may so mold an individual as to place forever upon his shoulders a burden of responsibility too rigid and too fraught with guilt for his comfortable growth." The child Katie illustrates that burden in her simple remark, "Sin sat heavily on my heart." Throughout the novel, the emphasis is upon the strict moral and social requirements of young Katie that instilled in her a sense of responsibility that she did not begin to understand what she had required of herself until she was a mid Janice Holt Giles began her writing career with an entry to a fiction contest in 1949 while still working at the Presbyterian Seminary in Louisville. Between 1950 and 1975 Giles wrote twenty-four books which were published. Noted primarily for her historical novels set in Kentucky - beginning with her debut novel The Enduring Hills - or on the Western frontier, she also wrote contemporary fiction set in the Kentucky hills, as well as autobiographical and nonfiction works, some of them co-authored with Henry. Her works include the Piney Woods trilogy, consisting of The Enduring Hills (1950), Mi