

## The Last Word

## Almost Heaven

By Russell Mokhiber

West Virginia is the most unhealthy state in America. That's according to a survey released earlier this year by *Forbes*.

The stats confirm it.

West Virginia has the highest percentage of adults who smoke (21%), the highest percentage of obese adults (41%), and the second shortest life expectancy (73.9 years).

West Virginia also ranks second worst in disease risk factors and prevalence, including the highest percentage of adults with high cholesterol (41%) and the highest diabetes mortality rate (41.7 deaths per 100,000 state residents).

Out of all 50 states, West Virginia also had the highest drug overdose death rate (75.03 per 100,000 state residents), more than 50% higher than the second-worst state (Delaware).

How did we get here?

The corporate takeover of this beautiful and formerly independent mountain state.

It's a long and sordid story – but here's the nutshell.

Let's start with the Whiskey Rebellion of 1791.

The Scots-Irish who settled into the hollers in West Virginia were self-reliant, independent and didn't need a state to tell them how to live.

They raised their own crops, hunted down their meat, fished their fish, and made their own rye whiskey.

The federal government said – to hell with that – and sought to impose a tax.

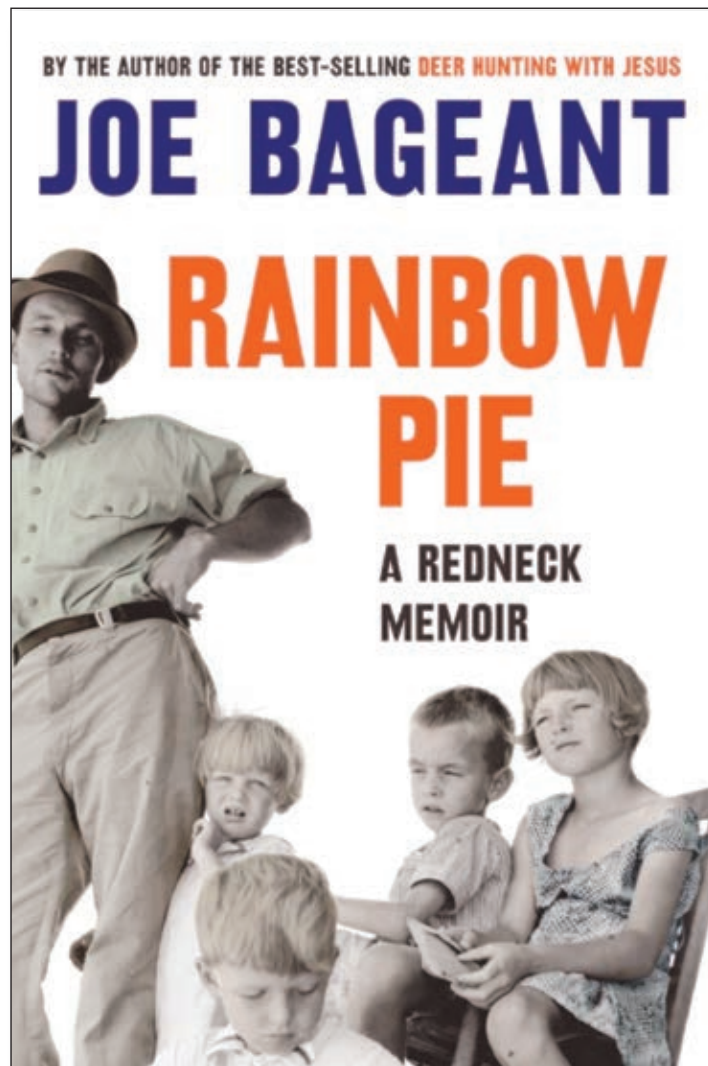
And thus the rebellion.

"The Whiskey Tax proposed to do something that Alexander Hamilton once called impossible," writes Fordham University Professor Steven Stoll in his book *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (Hill and Wang, 2017). "It reached into the relationship between mountain farmers and their land by requiring that they convert one very important product of their labor into money."

Fast forward a century "and we can see that the industrialization of the mountains extended and deepened this very process," Stoll writes.

"But coal and lumber companies did not want to monetize only a portion of the value highland folk created," he writes. "They sought to separate them from land altogether, compelling them to turn all their labor into money."

"Mountain people became



enmeshed in the national economy and the global division of labor," Stoll writes. "Hamilton did not have this in mind when he marched an army into Fayette County. But like the corporations that followed, he believed that moving people from rye and beans to coins and currency furthered capital, the power of the United States and historical progress."

(And progress there was with the thousands of workers killed in the mines, tens of thousands dying from black lung disease, and rampant devastation to the natural environment. Just sayin.)

The same game played out right here in Morgan County, West Virginia where our family has lived for more than 35 years now.

Morgan County's own Joe Bageant went on to become a world-renowned literary figure for his best-selling book on the rightward shift of the white underclass in Winchester, Virginia and beyond. He titled it – *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War* (Random House, 2007).

But more fundamental is Bageant's later and largely ignored book – *Rainbow Pie: A Redneck Memoir* (Scribe Australia, 2010) – documenting the transformation of Morgan County over three genera-

tions in the 20th century from a self-sufficient farming and hunting community, where each family spent on average no more than \$100 in cash, to one where most everything consumed was purchased in a marketplace dominated by credit cards, dollar stores, fast-food outlets and multinational grocery chains.

The only major grocery store in Morgan County today is Food Lion, which is owned by the US subsidiary of the Netherlands-based global retailer Ahold Delhaize, a company that operates more than 2,000 grocery stores in the eastern United States, which include, in addition to Food Lion, Stop

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& Shop, Giant Food, Giant/Martin's and Hannaford.

Prior to the corporate takeover, cooperation between neighbors was a bedrock of the community.

"Neighbors along Shanghai Road banded together to make lard and apple butter, put up feed corn, bale hay, thresh wheat, pick apples and plow snow off the roads," Bageant writes in *Rainbow Pie*. "One neighbor cut hair, another mended shoes. From birth to grave, you needed neighbors and they needed you. I was very lucky to have seen that culture, which showed me that a real community of shared labor toward the shared good is possible – or was at one time in my country."

Many of Bageant's relatives lived well into their eighties.

"Maybe it was the healthy exercise – a citified word if ever there was one," Bageant writes. "Farm folks back then were trying to avoid getting so damned much of it. To express relaxation and a let-up of toil, they'd say – 'Oh, I'm doing pretty good – I'm staying off my feet.'"

And when it came to eating?

"The very scale of our meals would be considered obscene and hedonistic today," he writes. "Maw's cooking was so good it would make you get down and pound the floor for joy. Everyone on the farm – which meant a bunch of us, because married aunts and uncles lived there half the time – ate meals together at a table about seven feet long and four feet wide. Often as not at breakfast, there would be a whole shoulder or a side of middlin' meat, along with three dozen biscuits, a couple of dozen eggs, half a gallon of sweet milk gravy, with three kinds of jam plus molasses on the side."

"Vegetables were fresh in season and canned for the winter – simple fare, such as green beans and tomato pickles. If you handed Maw a head of broccoli, she wouldn't have known whether to put it in a vase or a pan." (Bageant calls his grandparents Maw and Paw.)

"Meals were the heart of daily life, a rowdy family sacrament linking everyone. Childhood on this farm, and especially at the table, is the rootstock of my imagination. It is to this table and the faces around it that my mind returns to touch something near perfect."

While some old timers in

Morgan County might still know the Bageant family name (a quick check found no more Bageants on the voter rolls), few if anyone around here knows of Joe Bageant or his books.

In recent years, the corporate takeover of Bageant's home state has accelerated in pace. So in early 2011, I wanted to reintroduce the county to Bageant and his writings.

He was living just down the road in Winchester, Virginia at the time. I dialed him up and his wife answered. She said he wasn't feeling well, but she'd give him the message. He died a few weeks later.

Morgan County, with its 18,000 residents, is now home to four dollar stores, with more on the way. And on the whole, the population here wants more dollar stores – Bageant's life in a self-reliant community be damned.

Appearing on Glenn Greenwald's show in December 2023, Tucker Carlson, seemingly out of the blue, began ripping into the corporate takeover of middle America, Joe Bageant style.

"A smarter way to assess an economic system is by its results," Carlson said. "You need to ask – does this economic system produce a lot of dollar stores? And if it does, it's not a system that you want, because it degrades people. And it makes their lives worse, and it increases exponentially the amount of ugliness in your society. And anything that increases ugliness is evil."

"So if it's such a good system, why do we have all these dollar stores? Dollar store is not the only ugly thing being created in United States but it's the one of the most common and it's certainly the most obvious. If you have a dollar store, you're degraded. And any town that has a dollar store does not get better, it gets worse. The people who live there lead lives that are worse."

"The counter argument, to the extent that there is one, is well – they buy cheaper stuff. Great. But they become more unhappy. And the dollar store itself is a sort of symbol of the total lack of control over where you live and over the imposition of aggressively in your face ugly structures that send one message to you – which is you mean nothing. You were a consumer – not a human being or a citizen."

No more rainbow pie for Joe Bageant's West Virginia.

Or for Tucker Carlson.

Or for you or me.

CHC