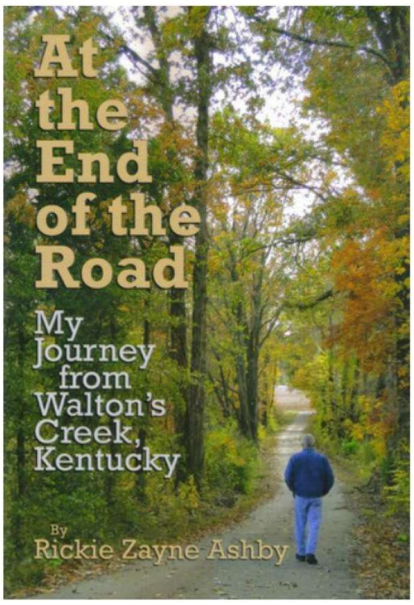
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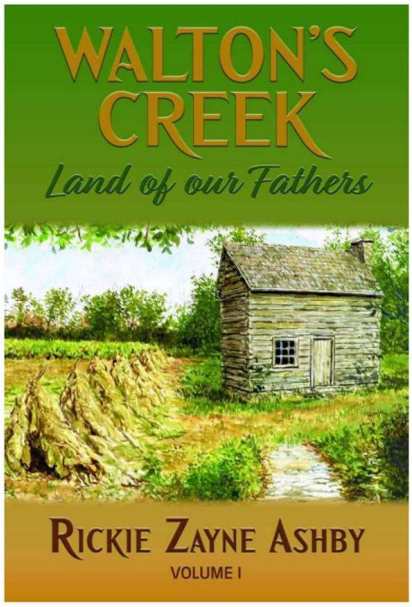
Local author revisits rural Kentucky in multiple books

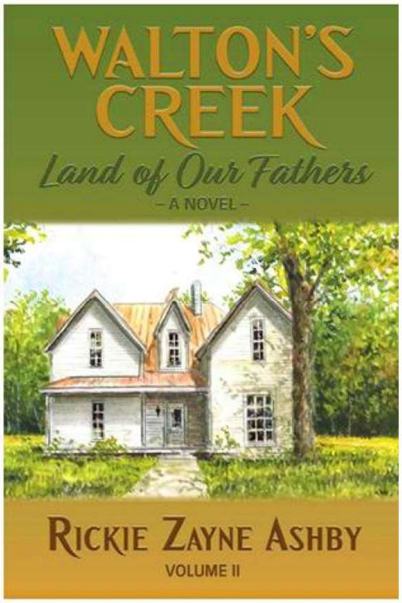
Posted: Sunday, July 12, 2026

This is somewhat of a departure for me, but I'd like to revisit three books by a local author that everyone interested in regional history and culture should have on their shelves. If you are familiar with this series of books by Rickie Zayne Ashby, you already know what a treasure they are. If you have not yet encountered his exceptional prose, you need to head to the nearest bookstore (bricks-and-mortar or online) and secure copies of all three today. You will not be disappointed.

Let me give you a preview of what you're in for when you delve into these extraordinary chronicles of life in a mostly bygone era in rural Kentucky. Please note that these excerpts are from my previous reviews of Ashby's literary contributions over the last decade.







"At the End of the Road: My Journey from Walton's Creek, Kentucky" by Rickie Zayne Ashby. Morley, Mo.: Acclaim Press, 2017, 206 pages, $26.95.

"The old church bell in the Walton's Creek Baptist Church sounded for the last time on Christmas Day 1949," Rickie Zayne Ashby explains near the beginning of "At the End of the Road: My Journey from Walton's Creek, Kentucky," his newly published chronicle of what it was like growing up in rural Kentucky during the 1950s and 1960s. "A fire demolished the structure shortly after worship services ended and the bell was ruined."

"Our little farmhouse was located on the Billy Goat Road and not far from a tiny stream named Walton's Creek," Ashby continues. "The one- room school had closed a few years before my birth and left the little church as the sole anchor of the community. My Uncle Ed Ashby led the effort to rebuild the church. The fire-ravaged building was replaced with a quaint little structure and the institution it nurtures has now entered a second century of life."

So begins Ashby's foray into what things were like in this corner of the world for a vast majority of country folk whose descendants still inhabit the ground they made their own only a couple of generations after this region was originally settled by pioneers who were surely but steadily moving civilization across the great expanse of the United States.

The book consists of sixteen short chapters, each depicting a different though intricately connected aspect of Ashby's recollection of a way of life he describes in his conversational literary style as "disappearing." As I worked my way through each vignette, I found myself sharing the bittersweet

feeling he must have had as he poured his heart and soul into re-creating what ultimately shaped him into who he is today.

Many readers of a certain age will be able to instantly relate to what Ashby describes in "The Water Bucket," which immediately brought back childhood memories of having to go to the bathroom at our country church building – before it had indoor plumbing:

"The good old days were both good and bad. The delight of eating fresh food from one's own garden or chicken house or hog pen was one of the good, but plopping down on a cold outdoor toilet in zero weather was not. Occasionally the only pages left in the Sears Roebuck catalog were too slick to be efficient for the task at hand. We were not always fortunate enough to have a bucket of red corncobs. My mom and dad always swore that red was the best. I have no opinion in the matter since our old privy never had any of the others."

I found "At the End of the Road" to be a warm and wonderful trip through a (mostly) bygone era, albeit one that many readers can still recall with clarity. The portrait he paints of what day-to-day existence was like in the rural South for many of us is eerily compelling – and just a plain-old good read. Ashby is a master storyteller who knows his subject matter intimately. I finished the book with the sense that I knew his family on more than just a superficial level; it literally felt like we grew up in the same place.

As you have probably surmised, I enjoyed this one immensely and I feel many readers would, too. I recommend this charming slice of Americana without reservation.

"Walton's Creek: Land of Our Fathers (Volume 1)" by Rickie Zayne Ashby. Morley, MO: Acclaim Press, 2024, 272 pages, $29.95.

"The year was 1807 when wooden carts pulled by teams of oxen topped a small hill near the tiny stream called Walton's Creek," Ashby explains at the beginning of "Volume 1," his sophomore excursion into a past that many of us know all-too-well. "Jake Atlee and his large family surveyed a landscape of 1,000 acres in a small valley that had been purchased from surveyor Matthew Walton."

"The pristine area was what Jake called their Promised Land," Ashby continues. "It had been a long journey from Virginia, but the Atlees had finally found the land of their dreams and home for them and their descendants for over two centuries. Jake declared that the Walton's Creek community is where God wanted them to always live. The book of Isaiah was prominent in the minds of the Atlee clan. The 1000-acre survey was indeed their land of milk and honey."

I remember my grandparents – I had all four of them until I was in college – recalling on many occasions what life was like during that exceptionally challenging period in our collective history. Ashby captures both the reality as well as the ambiance of the era perfectly. I could almost hear my grandfather's voice uttering a barely audible "Amen" at several points when I was reading the book.

One of the most endearing features of Ashby's writing involves the explicitly authentic voice that permeates his narrative. I grew up surrounded by people who talked exactly the way they do in "Walton's Creek," and it brought back several warm memories from my childhood and adolescence. Check out the following from "Aunt Polly's Iced Tea (1953)," one of the concluding chapters, for an illuminating glimpse of what I mean:

"Now, my young man, gonna go over to yere Uncle Al's and Aunt Polly's today. Gonna spend the whole day. I done give ye yere marchin' orders, but I'm gonna do it ag'in. Better pay attention. Uncle Al and Aunt Polly ain't used to no snotty nosed kids a runnin' 'round the house and ding dongin' them ever fifteen minutes for somethin' to eat or drink. Stay outta the house 'cept when I call ye for dinner. When we set down to dinner, don't be askin' for nothin'. I'll fill yere plate, and don't ye take a bite 'til the grownups start to eat. Mind yere manners, and don't ask for seconds, or I'll wear ye out when we get home."

It could almost hear my beloved Granny giving me similar advice – on more than one occasion – when I used to visit her family and friends back in the early 1960s. Highly recommended.

"Walton's Creek: Land of Our Fathers, Volume II" by Rickie Zayne Ashby. Morley, MO: Acclaim Press, 2025, 272 pages, $29.95 (hardcover).

"The small candy counter was generally the center of Mickey's fascination in his uncle's store," Ashby explains near the beginning of "Volume II," his latest expedition into an era he obviously knows by heart. "Rolled cinnamon candy from Reed's Candy Company emitted a powerful aroma. Fifth Avenue, Baby Ruth, and Bit-O-Honey bars were always present. The latter was a simple blend of honey, taffy, and almonds in a flat bar enjoyed by children and adults since the 1920s."

"The chewing gum section typically contained Wrigley's Spearmint, Doublemint, and Juicy Fruit, plus Bazooka bubble gum," he continues. "Ray Sawyer's favorite gum was Black Jack, America's first flavored gum; the licorice-laced Black Jack had been introduced in the 1880s. Clove gum became popular as a breath freshener during Prohibition, and a pepsin-based gum named Beemans was brought to market near the turn of the century as a treatment for heartburn."

OK. If you were able to relate to the products noted in the above passages, you will find Ashby's latest novel based on his real-life adventures hard to put down. The sheer excitement of going to the store with your parents and zeroing in on the candy section is something I could relate to instantly. On one level, it seems kind of quaint to recall a time with such simple pleasures brought so much anticipation to children – especially given the technological distractions of the modern era. On another level, it occurs to me that perhaps we've lost something essential over the decades that span this exquisite little slice of Americana.

Along with the nostalgia and feel-good stories are some melancholy episodes with somewhat darker overtones. As Ashby reminds us, what we remember inevitably tends to be flavored by the passage of time and gradually altered by our selective memory. In this regard, Ashby does an excellent job of tempering realism with our subjective understanding of a time that is rapidly receding into the past. More than anything, he makes you think. After all, some experiences are universal and not limited to specific generations. The details may change, but not the essence of the underlying truths.

Volume II is augmented with a number of heart-warming illustrations by Eric Lindgren, a local artist who many will recognize, along with contributions by John Ward, a nationally award-winning Kentucky artist, and Joe Vick, who was raised by missionary parents in Ethiopia; his work can be seen at shows throughout the Southeastern United States. Honestly, I found the images to be complementary and even integral to the stories Ashby is telling.

Full disclosure: These days, when he is not actively submerged in his latest writing project, Ashby spends much of his time researching, traveling, attending book signing events, and keeping up with the latest offerings from his friends in the close-knit community of local authors. We meet three or four times a year at local restaurants and relive the past and speculate on the future. He always brings me some goodies from his garden, which my family – especially my wife – appreciates. In many respects, he is the ideal author to write this series of books.

Ashby's down-to-earth approach to storytelling and his intimate familiarity with a way of life he knows so well make his books instantly relatable to those who call Kentucky home. Check him out if you get the chance.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.