Prologue
West—By God—Virginia

West Virginia is a unique state that has had identity problems ever since it seceded from the Secession during the Civil War. Because of the mountains it has remained perhaps more of a pocket culture than any other state in the Union, blocked off from the sources and graces of the seaboard and taught to develop self-reliance and self-concentration. Few of the Virginians living on the west side of the Alleghenies could identify with slaveholders and the plantation mentality of the bottomlands. Walled off at the start anyway, they have always looked more to God than to any other central government. Bumper stickers there echo the folk boast, "West—by God—Virginia," and license plates proclaim with the same bravado, "Almost Heaven." Such slogans harmonize with the ubiquitous "Jesus Saves" emblazoned on highway boulders and billboards. I've thought a lot about this state since 1950, when I met a West Virginian whom I married the following year. Visiting her relatives there over the years with our own children, I had had a long time to get to know and to treasure this state before my work involved me there in a totally new and unforeseen way.

In May of 1973 the state supervisor of language arts invited me on behalf of the West Virginia Department of Education to make a day-long presentation the following December in the capital, Charleston. "As far as subject matter is concerned, we can discuss that later. However we are interested in your books with Houghton Mifflin Co."[1] This portion of the letter of invitation referred to a language arts and reading series for elementary and secondary school, called *Interaction,* that I had directed as senior author/editor and that had just been released that year. As an author of two college textbooks used in methods courses for teachers, I had become accustomed for some years before to invitations from school districts, colleges, and sometimes state departments of education to consult or give workshops or talks. But the circumstances of this invitation seemed to aim at asking me to explain not merely my philosophy and practices for teaching language, as I had set them forth in the methods textbooks, but also the new *Interaction* program itself. "There is a good

deal of interest in our state concerning your new program, since it fits the philosophy of our State Comprehensive Language Arts Program," said a follow-up letter that October.

Then in November someone in the state Department of Education telephoned me to say that the meeting had been canceled because of the "energy crisis." This had to be an invented reason, but I couldn't even guess at the real one—not until the following year. In September 1974, I was recognizing *Interaction* books held before television cameras on the evening news and reading quotations from them in newspapers and magazines.

Interaction was a work of love. Though the largest program of school materials ever done till then, as the president of Houghton Mifflin stated at its press debut in San Francisco, it began as personal vision and remained remarkably close to its original ideals throughout all the horrors and rigors of corporate production. As much as anything, this is a tribute to the rare moral caliber of the thirty co-authors, whom the publisher allowed me to choose with a free hand unusual in such ventures. *Interaction* co-authors were mostly classroom teachers successfully going about their business, ones I had identified from previous years of developing curriculum in schools as a consultant. I knew they understood from their own experience how I was trying to reform language teaching and believed in it because they had already been working along the same lines. Some were creative specialists in singing or acting or storytelling, folklore or children's literature or visual media. They shared a devotion to youth and growth that far overshadowed any personal ambition.

This team pitched in without knowing what profit, if any, they would make, because the program was unique and risky. As compilers of anthologies, we bought rights to reprint or record selections with little regard for the costs being charged against our royalty accounts. From our familiarity with standard stuff we knew we could have ensured success and fortune by doing the program very differently, to fit commercial bandwagons, and often our increasingly jittery publisher pushed us hard to compromise with conventions we had repudiated at the outset.

Over and over co-authors subordinated personal wishes and feelings to the good of the program. Many had not known each other before I suddenly threw them together, but they collaborated readily, and *Interaction* soon became a very strong and warm family as well as a program. I don't want to think of how often I wasted their work by changing the concept of certain materials or by juggling assignments among co-authors, but they forgave this because they knew they had to if I were to stick to the principles of the program and to orchestrate the mind-boggling complexity of a set of learning materials comprising two film series, dozens of card and board games, 800 activity cards, hundreds of

recorded selections, and other materials besides the 172 paperback books of reading matter that came eventually to be banned, as well as adopted, in West Virginia.

Interaction was a calculated risk, and the irony of its issuing from a publisher known for conservatism was not lost on those in the profession, who gaped attentively. Two factors emboldened the publisher to produce a major program that only a few independent teachers had ever tried out. First, my stock was high at the time, and the company bought into me. The methods books for teachers, which it had also published, were not only selling well in college education courses for teacher training but were earning a good school following that seemed to augur well for the embodying of these ideas in materials for youngsters as well. Second, when we signed contracts for the program in June 1970, the country was still riding the crest of progressive energy that had wrought so many changes in the 1960s and seemed to mandate further innovations in schooling.

Through *Interaction* we co-authors aimed to make really feasible the kind of humane individualizing often talked about but seldom done because conventional classroom management and textbooks based on the teacher as master of ceremonies make it impossible. Small working parties of students need to be doing different things at the same time, according to the needs and the capacities and the previous experiences of the individuals. I called the program "student-centered" to indicate this emphasis while avoiding the term "individualization," which had been fraudulently preempted for programmed learning, which is really isolated and mechanistic learning. In England a comparable approach to ours bore the name of the "open classroom," but the term became garbled and misapplied in the United States, and, furthermore, we had based *Interaction* on native experience not on imported notions. Parallel to the British teachers who had worked out a solid methodology for doing what still looked risky and radical here, we were trying to spearhead a movement that, aided by materials designed especially for the job, could eventually establish the practicality of letting individuals take different pathways to the same general goals.

The program was conspicuous for its unusually rich array of diverse subjects, media, and methods. The point of this multiplicity was to ensure that any learner of any background, level of development, temperament, or interest could find plenty of ways to engage with and develop language. For this reason also, speaking, listening, reading, and writing were integrated with each other and with the other arts and media to create a holistic interplay of warm-ups and follow-ups and lead-ins and carry-overs. The methodology alone of placing self-directing students into small-group interaction would have been enough of a risk to run.

On top of this, however, the paperback anthologies, the illustrations, and the recordings reflected the diversity of situations, values, tastes, dialects, and so on that this country discovered within itself during the sixties. We took a strong stand for pluralism and multicultural expression that went far beyond wooing of minorities; we found that a feeling for folklore, a savoring of different styles, a respect for the whole human range made us want to set forth like a feast the varieties of reading matter. Many books were original or rare as school texts—brain teasers and codes, rebuses and jumprope jingles, tongue twisters, transcripts of public events, chronicles and memoir, reportage and research—besides all the usual and manifold forms of modern and folk literature. The formats of the paperback books were as various as the contents—like trade books in a bookstore rather than textbooks—different trim sizes, lengths, illustration styles, and type styles. All this heady stuff stopped in their tracks children and adults alike. How often people said to us, "I wish they'd had books like this when *I* was going to school." But *Interaction* has long since dwindled out of print—while those forces that crystallized against it in mountain-bound West Virginia have gathered strength from coast to coast.

Besides being the state capital, Charleston is the urban center of Kanawha County, which contains as foil for this relatively affluent, sophisticated gem some of the most primitive rural society in America. Miners and other workers and farmers live in hollows focused on tiny fundamentalist churches of 40 to 50 members—pockets within the larger pocket culture of the state itself. Interstates connect Charleston in all four directions, and it lies at the confluence of the Elk and Kanawha rivers, the Kanawha flowing as a major tributary into the Ohio toward the northwest. The terrain flattens enough around the junction to allow a large city to cohere and to provide some beautiful river real estate, but it was necessary to lop off a mountaintop to fit in a jet airport. Flying into there epitomizes the city's situation. One moment you see only mountains, then, curving a little more, you are startled to view a large city down there centered on the splendid gold dome of a classic federal-style capitol facing the Kanawha River. How did *that* get here? Then you start estimating the length of that artificial mesa bearing a runway that begins in midair and ends in midair. You imagine Charleston was airlifted in the same way you are being plunked down in here.

Many places that figure in our story lie outside of Charleston, which had a population then of 70,000 out of the county's 230,000. If you drive west toward Huntington on I-64 you pass through, on the other shore of the Kanawha River, one of the nation's biggest forests of smokestacks and complexes of chemical plants and refineries—South Charleston—an amazing panorama that goes on for miles, disappearing intermittently

only to resume at Nitro, the second biggest town in the county, of which it marks the northwestern edge. This stretch of interstate and valley between Nitro and South Charleston, including Dunbar and St. Albans, looks much like many similar outlying industrial districts anywhere else in the United States, not pretty but not squalid. But the country is not far away. Break out of South Charleston southwesterly on two-lane Route 214 and you find typical Upper Valley settlements of a hundred families or less living in modest but well-kept houses set attractively in the hollows or along the creases of the verdant hills. The town of Alum Creek is sequestered back in here, named like many hamlets in the county for one of the little tributaries draining the hills into the king of the county, the Kanawha. Part rural, part industrial, the Upper Valley represents a kind of mean between Charleston and the Lower Kanawha Valley. Most of the leaders and the action in the county drama were generated in the Upper because it stands culturally somewhere between the extremes of the city itself and the pure country life that characterizes the Lower Valley.

Significantly perhaps, I-64 does not continue from the Upper Valley along the Lower but skips over the latter and the equally backwoods Fayette County. Although the same U.S. Route 60 that I-64 parallels from Huntington to Charleston continues southeast along the Kanawha all the way into Virginia, this interstate does not start again until 60 approaches the gracious resort area of White Sulphur Springs, nearly out of the state. So you go out of Charleston into the Lower Valley on this two-lane highway that mimics every curve in the Kanawha River as it hugs the east bank, pass through Belle and Cedar Grove, and enter a part of your nation skipped over indeed.

In the fall of 1978 my wife and I included this stretch in a camper tour we made of the Indian mound culture in West Virginia and Ohio. A few days before, we had left my wife's home town, Fairmont, which like many Appalachian towns has never significantly got over being a depressed area. It's a poignant place. The slopes pitch steeply into the chemically bright green Monongahela River, which cuts the town in two, and the outlines of buildings fighting the angle seem sketched in with coal itself. My wife went to school with a lot of children from the edge of town and the nearby hollows, for Fairmont and the country have never been so starkly separated as in Charleston, the bigger city. She was the daughter of the principal of her high school. Her mother was a first-grade teacher, and what my wife hadn't experienced about the area directly from classmates she could easily hear in the stories her parents had to tell, many about the poor country families they dealt with. Some children out in the hollows are abandoned to the back yard all day and never talked to, so hard is life

for the parents; the ghetto is by comparison a rich environment for learning. Fairmont had made the national media in the sixties for the very controversial firing of a liberal president of Fairmont State, which stocks regional schools with teachers. When during their retirement my parents-in-law tried to run a Headstart program in a rural area they encountered so much squabbling and opposition from a jealous community that they had to give up. Country locals fight over outside money like dogs over a bone. But even my wife was not prepared for the rude feeling of Lower Kanawha Valley, the state of the people there, the heavy vibrations.

That skipped-over part of the Kanawha Valley has the blunted and grotesque aspect of the southeastern corner of Georgia that James Dickey described in *Deliverance.* The contrast he builds during the men's drive from Atlanta to the wild river matches remarkably the change you feel driving out of Charleston into southern Kanawha County. (I once met in Atlanta a language arts supervisor whose son, a Harvard anthropologist, was doing a project in that Appalachian corner of Georgia just as if it were a foreign country instead of his home state.) Most human life—mines, little stores, cottages, highway, railroad—crowd between the Kanawha River and the mountains, which are really wild except for settlements along the occasional ravine road. Several hundred yards up the precipitous woods is another world. This place does more than touch me; I feel a rawness, a danger, a suffering.

Nipping across the river at one point to state Route 61, we met, on a similar narrow strip on the other bank, a sad young woman working the counter of a ravine joint who told us of daring with friends to search for a black panther reported to haunt a spot above the highway where we were headed. We weren't so eager to plunge into the rattlesnake-infested wilderness harboring our scatter of mysterious Indian stone works that we couldn't be distracted by tales of ghostly black panthers. She and friends found instead a large, fresh grave, heard strange noises, and felt a sudden physical cold wave sweep over them along with such a feeling of evil that they ran pell-mell back down the mountainside.

Some men she queried for us said the Indian ruins did indeed lie above this hamlet, just as we had read, but that the old mine road led in only partway and that we would have a hard time indeed ever finding the stones hiking blindly around in that dense, snakey brush. For further information they sent us to a post office a few miles away.

This representative of the United States government turned out to be part of an abandoned, side-tracked railroad car with a hatch on the side. You peer into this unpainted, dim interior and see, sure enough, some postal cubbyholes. You face a spent, tubercular-looking "postmistress" resembling the subject of an old homestead photo depicting early hard

times and then become aware that an American flag is flying over her outpost, so grimed into the overlying gray of the landscape that you hadn't recognized it.

And this whole county – Charleston, Upper Valley, Lower Valley – is a single school district! In its mixture of identities it is a model of the explosive potentialities within America.