

# THE KING OF COALMAN'S HILL

*By Matt Shea*

“The King of Coalman’s Hill,” by Matt Shea.  
ISBN 978-1-62137-748-1 (Softcover); 978-1-62137-749-8 (eBook).

Published 2015 by Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., P.O.  
Box 9949, College Station, TX , 77842, US.

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## *Dedication*

JANENE MARIE ANKARBERG is by far one of the most special people I've ever met. In fact, we were even married at one time!

We are all familiar with that 'good kid' who worked at the local convenient store in town. (*Her own 7-eleven store!*) The smiling face full of enthusiasm that everyone fell in love with.

With pride she greeted customers and made sure there was always enough fresh coffee for everyone. Jerry Lewis fundraisers, softball team sponsorships and car washes for good causes are just

a few of the fun-filled events that were known to happen through her store. Always spirited, she would dress up like something out of a Boris Karloff movie on Halloween *while serving her loyal customers at the store!*

Her children, Laura and Jessie, could not have asked for a *better* mom. Janene's husband, Ron, along with her mother, Karen, and brother, Travis, all had a better life because of her.

*All good things must come to an end.*

Janene was advanced to Heaven on December 31, 2014, with her legacy continuing. Her memory has saturated all of us with a feeling that she is still very much in our lives — *just managing a bigger store.*

In honor of the many lives she touched and the happiness she brought, I hereby dedicate this book to:

Janene Marie Ankarberg



*Janene and her world-class smile.*

*The song has ended, but  
the melody lingers on.*

**Irving Berlin**



# A Special Thanks To Our Friend, Ric!

I AM ONE OF MANY who have felt a personal bond with *This Week in America* host Ric Bratton throughout the years. For me, he filled the shoes vacated by Paul Harvey and Johnny Carson. The familiar jingle that plays while his big brother voice takes over the airwaves has always brought out the child in me.



Whether he's interviewing an icon in the entertainment industry or a fellow unknown starving artist who expresses himself through good will, it's all good. That's because *everyone* is special to Ric Bratton, regardless of fame.

Somewhere out there, someone contacted Ric and brought my writings to his attention. From there, he took the fight to us. On more than one occasion, 'our' Ric allowed my daughter, Laura, Ella Ray, Renée Klause and me to share center stage with him—a *gift* that allowed the whole world to hear our story.

The immortal Andy Warhol quote about being famous in America for fifteen minutes definitely applies when it comes to knowing Ric.

This is my eighth publication and the four of us will celebrate the new book followed by a toast to *This Week in America* and our friend, Ric Bratton.

Ric, you have put wind in our sails and have done something outstanding for which we will always feel indebted. When we listen to your program we get to say:

*That's our friend, Ric!*

Thanks for the boost you have given us and keep up the great broadcasting!

Your friends:

Laura, Renée, Ella and Matt

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# Chapter 1

ON COALMAN'S HILL, a lone snowflake fluttered from the sky in silence.

The humble soul of Clayton Graves watched as he cast a wish. The paper-thin fragment continued to sway in a balanced rhythm as it fell to the Earth. Finally the ice crystal landed on a lone tree stump where he and his childhood friends once gathered. A few more flakes followed gracefully, and then a few more...

Soon the intensity of a heavenly pillow fight broke out. With gratitude, the sixty-two-year-old African American raised his arms toward the sky with praise. Slowly, he turned in circles with mouth wide open and tongue sticking out to catch snowflakes. The child in Clayton Graves was still alive!

A prayer had been answered—Christmas time was refusing to leave.

The winter wonderland was receiving yet another layer of precious snow, taking the valley further back through time. Slopes of polished ice continue to rule the land, and firewood remained the gold standard. Internal combustion engines were of no use as yesterday's sleighs were summoned to duty—a necessary means to haul hay, provisions, or transport family members to church.

Every child's dream, both young and old, had come true, with the most cherished gift being granted: no school.

Clayton Graves stood tall, dressed in his battle gear. A billowing red nylon ski jacket with a worn camouflage jumpsuit and army-issued snow boots adorned the retired soldier. Around his neck was a lengthy plaid neck scarf that personified the heroic fighter pilot who lived in every boy. A

matching pair of gray woolen mittens and beanie provided additional warmth against the winter cold.

It was now time to face a challenge that dated back to his childhood. With stopwatch in hand, he looked down at the vintage Flexible Flyer sled that his grandfather had gotten for Christmas generations ago. Written across its deck in faded black paint was *The Graves Express*, a display that illustrated family pride.

The spirited old man puffed out his chest, and with good reason. He held bragging rights from a past accomplishment. Clayton was once *The King of Coalman's Hill*; a title that he'd vowed to regain. One that he lost to a childhood friend named Hoarse Parker many years ago.

Clayton picked up the rope that was tied to the steering arms and marched ahead, taking methodical steps. His heavy boots crunched in the fresh snow. He was approaching the starting line, where the best of the best were timed sledding down Coalman's Hill. The designated starting line was where the old stump protruded from the ground. This was the 'meeting place' whenever his friends needed to discuss something in private. It was also where champions were crowned.

The finish line was almost one hundred and fifty yards down the steep hill. It was an imaginary line where a rickety old wooden gate had stood open for over a hundred years. It served as the back entrance to the coal mine that once flourished here.

Mysteriously, there was a massive metal plate that was equal to the side of a house just before the gate's opening. Clayton and his friends had always wondered why it was there.

Was it protecting a secret entrance to something important?

Was it an entryway to the center of the Earth?

Were people buried there?

Once they tried to lift a corner of it to look and see, but found that it was impossible to budge.

The iron plate did serve a purpose, however. It froze during the winter, allowing ice to form on its surface. This was crucial to anyone who challenged the title. The ice immediately increased one's speed like a bolt of lightning. Often, if a rider wasn't in true form, they would turn sideways and roll in the snow over and over again.

The gladiator trudged through the snow, pulling his steed. Looking at the stump, he gave a slight nod. This was to acknowledge the wonderful childhood he had with his buddies. They were a close-knit group of guys who were always there for one another. Friends that had passed away years ago, and were forever embedded in Clayton's mind. Watching the snowflakes swirl around the old stump brought back fond memories...

There was Charles Franklin; a tall, lanky friend he'd met at a church function when he was seven. Charles always had a smile on his face and offered encouragement to everyone. They were teammates in basketball, with Clayton always leading in assists. Charles died one Easter morning of a heart attack.

Earl Black would be there. He was affectionately nicknamed "Blackie" despite being the only white playmate in his social group. Earl was small in stature, but with his wild blond hair and energetic play was always guaranteed fun! Earl died while trying to save a boy from drowning.

Rolland White, alias "Whitie," never missed an outing. He was the largest boy in the group, but would never hurt a fly. If there was ever a discrepancy with other boys, Rolland's warm diplomacy would always prevail. He went on to be a pastor and youth counselor. One day he was diagnosed with diabetes, and shortly after that, went to the Lord.

Ever-present would be Carlton Jennings, the class clown. Carlton's pranks never stopped, but were always harmless. It was just his way of saying, "hi!" Carlton was always the first

one to share whenever he had candy. He would go on to be the group's first casualty. Carlton enlisted in the Army after high school and was soon reported missing in action.

The brother team of Daryl and Melvin Cooke were inseparable, with little brother, Melvin always trying extra hard to gain Daryl's approval. This drove Melvin to great success, as he would go on to become the county's first African-American police chief. Tragically, the good man who never touched alcohol was killed by a drunk driver during the holidays. His brother Daryl lived until he was almost sixty.

Last would be Hoarse Parker; his best friend and worst competitor. Hoarse was the most athletic boy in school, and pushed Clayton to excel in sports and in life. In football he relied on Clayton for key blocks and scolded him profusely whenever he failed. Many times Clayton sacrificed his body allowing Hoarse to score. It was as if they were brothers.

The all-city running back currently held the quickest time down Coalman's Hill—an unbelievable 23 seconds!

Looking at the lonely stump was a grim reminder of the present reality. Still, the memories would always be ingrained in Clayton's soul. Often a peculiar quirk of nature would suggest that they were all present, cheering on their friend to achieve a record time. Sometimes a slight whisper of wind would dust a fine mist of snow on him. It was the tradition he and his friends held before a run; wishing the rider good luck with a shower of snow. A gentle breeze through barren trees would create this sprinkling without disturbing anything else...

There were times when he thought he'd misplaced his gloves, only to find them inside a hollowed-out knot on the side of the stump. At one time they hid messages there and covered them with leaves. Then there were the times when he simply felt their presence and just *had* to wave back.

At the official starting line, a motivated Clayton Graves let go of the rope. His adrenaline started to mount as his

breath pulsed with a fog-like vapor resembling a locomotive gaining speed. He stared down the field blanketed with fresh snow. The course was a switchback-type path with a few offsetting curves that scaled the back side of the old coal mine. The trail held a glossy shine along the packed snow and ice from the many who glided down and climbed back up the hill. In essence, it was a slalom that allowed their sleds to travel at dangerous speeds; for those who dared...

The warrior that lives in every competitor was alive and well inside Clayton Graves. His last attempt had fallen short of the record time by a mere six seconds! The long walk up the slope had him inspect every turn and bump that had cost him precious time. From there, he would plot out his next attempt to ensure a better run.

Once home; *The Graves Express* would go through a thorough inspection. The cherished heirloom handed down by his father would be meticulously dried off and closely viewed at all angles. Sometimes the frame was bent or a board had come lose. All would be repaired as good as new, with steel wool being used to smooth the metal surface it rode on. Lastly, the all-important wax was generously applied to the runners.

There was another aspect that was equally important: track conditions.

The early morning guaranteed a coating of ice over the glistening snow. This allowed some of the fastest times on Coalman's Hill to be recorded. The evening was also known to provide an even better condition, if the weather cooperated. A brief warming trend could partially melt the snow on the trail they raced sleds on, with cooler evening temperatures creating a polished ice finish. When such an occurrence took place, the slope was set for record runs.

It was early evening, and Clayton's sled was prepped and ready to go. Ideal conditions awaited in the newly formed ice that reflected the snowy sky.

Everything was ready.

It was now time to follow the protocol required to be crowned *The King Of Coalman's Hill*—a standard procedure where the participant lined up even with the stump at the crest of the hill.

They were to lay face down on their sled and remain motionless until given the signal. At that moment, they were allowed to push themselves once—a cue for the timer to be activated as they began their decent. Flurries of snow dust were thrown at the rider like rice at a wedding ceremony. Friends yelled encouragement and cheered their comrade on as he picked up speed approaching the first turn.

There was one last finishing touch needed to make a record run *official*.

The timepiece.

Clayton took off his right-hand glove and placed it in the pocket of his ski jacket. He then reached into his pant's pocket and felt a small metal disc with a fine chain fastened to it. He pulled it out to display a vintage stopwatch, and turned it around to view an inscription—one that always brought tears to the man's eyes. Tears that eventually turned into a smile beaming with pride and determination.

The letters etched on the back of the stopwatch read:

*William Floyd Graves*

It was his late uncle's watch from a war fought decades ago. Another priceless heirloom handed down from the Graves family line. This keepsake was honored by his friends and used exclusively to measure the time needed to be crowned *The King Of Coalman's Hill*.

The stage was set as Clayton positioned his sled at the edge of the hill. With stopwatch in hand, he lay down on the fastest sled from his grandfather's day and waited until he *sensed* he was authorized to go.

The moment of truth had come. With the snowfall mystically subsiding, Clayton knew that he was cleared to go.

In one motion, he extended both hands forward with the sacred stopwatch ever-so protected. Using his opened left hand and clenched fist, he clawed into the icy snow and activated the timer. The sled was launched utilizing a swimmer's stroke as Clayton embarked on his latest record attempt.

Carefully, the jockey positioned the wooden deck on rails for the first turn. With increasing speed he glided swiftly through the first obstacle, like an Olympian competing for the luge face-down. He entered the second turn immediately, dragging his left foot slightly to maintain stability. Again, he flew through the turn in expertise fashion. Straightening out the projectile, he dodged a few bumps of packed snow. Clayton took careful aim at the frozen plate that rapidly approached him. It had to be entered *just right*, or the ride would instantaneously get off-kilter, costing valuable seconds. He was now traveling down the fastest point of the course with everything on the line.

Gritting his teeth, he hung onto the steering arms. Clayton took a deep breath and froze in position, hoping to shoot over the solid ice and regain his title. The transition from riding on packed snow to pure ice proved to be too much on this attempt. The sudden lack of friction caused a surge of speed that telegraphed his approach was slightly off course.

As soon as the runners left the cushion of snow to ride on the hardness of winter ice, trouble began. Clayton began to veer left, causing him to instinctively drag the opposite foot and lean in the same direction—a desperate attempt to salvage the run. This technique allowed him to avert tragedy in exchange for costing precious seconds. The sled was reduced to a slower speed as it straightened out and coasted over the metal plate. At last, he crossed the finish line and stopped the watch.

The evening's setting sun was falling fast, with just enough light to see if our hero was victorious. He

immediately steered into a snowbank to end the ride. With heart pumping and hopes alive, he got off the sled to see where the second hand had stopped. Breathing heavily, he anxiously held the timepiece close to his face and studied it.

His time: thirty-two seconds. Not quite as good as his best, and well off the current record-holder's mark of twenty-three seconds. He closed the protective shield over the glass face and held the watch with both hands.

"Darn!" he exclaimed, stomping his right foot on the ground and kicking up a mist of snow. He spun around in frustration. At that moment, a feeling of tranquility overcame him. He again reminded himself that he was the sole survivor of his childhood. Looking up to the heavens, he addressed those who cared. "Don't worry," he shouted, shaking the stopwatch at the clouds. "I'll get it next time!"

Clayton Graves put the antique watch back into his pant's pocket. Bending over, he picked up the rope tethered to his sled. The revitalized child began the arduous climb back home. Clayton would now survey the tracks left by the sled's runners. He methodically accessed every turn, every 'cut' he took to see where improvements could be made.

Eventually, he found himself on top of the hill. He stared at the old stump with a peculiar feeling that made him question whether his childhood friends were actually there. He shook his head toward them to convey his disappointment. Next, he displayed a facial expression followed by a jest that promised he'd do better on his next attempt.

Glancing to the far left, he saw what was once the home of the old coalmine's foreman. It was a two-story wooden structure adorned with a deck that stretched along the entire front. Its charm continued with a massive stone chimney to one side, and white lace curtains in every window.

The rustic structure was more than just a house, however. It was also an old bunkhouse where many could stay. Beds with partitions and additional portable beds filled

the upstairs, where there was a lone bathroom and shower. Downstairs featured a dining room from the previous century. It was equipped with a long table and matching benches that resembled the Last Supper.

The entryway to this house hid its hotel aspect, appearing like a traditional American home. It boasted a kitchen, living room, dining room, three bedrooms and a bathroom. The integrity of the structure remained consistent, with matching polished wooden floors and walls. It was built as a permanent onsite residence for the coalmine's foreman, with the necessities for housing any worker in need.

This was where tired miners who sweated away long hours often stayed. Decades of working men, warm meals and stories in front of a roaring fire had filled this residence. When the coal plant went out of business, its legacy had continued. It had gone on to become home for a community-oriented family that also had an open-door policy. This household however, had added an extra touch. They held the distinction of being the first non-white citizens in the county.

They were known as the Graves family.