

Pancake's imagination rooted in West Virginia soil

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By Edward Fox
STAFF WRITER

MILTON — It was two months after his death on Palm Sunday 1979 in Charlottesville, Va., before people who knew Breece D'J Pancake in this town learned that the gunshot wound of which he died had been self-inflicted. At first, it was said he was cleaning a gun.

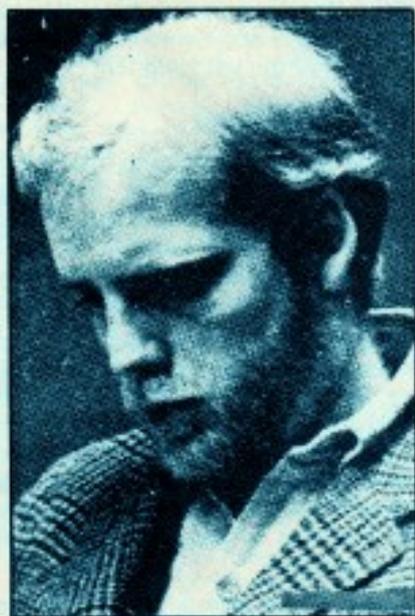
Pancake was Milton's local boy made good. He grew up here, wove his experience of country life into stories that brought him to the edge of literary fame, and in so doing continued the work of showing and explaining West Virginia to the rest of the United States.

Friends of his who still live here find it hard to believe that someone with such promise and vitality should end his own life. Ricky Blenko, for instance, who runs the Blenko Glass Co. factory with his father, says, "I tend to see him playing around with the gun and the gun going off."

Pancake's career was in many ways like that of many West Virginians who leave country towns like Milton in search of better opportunities in bigger cities in other states.

But Pancake, an artist, perhaps felt more acutely the sense of dislocation that transplanted Mountaineers feel in cities like Detroit and Chicago, and which leads some of them to return. At the time of his death, he was by all accounts troubled by somber preoccupations. His imagination was rooted in West Virginia, especially Milton, yet he could not live here and succeed as a writer at the same time.

The sense of rootedness is one of the strongest themes in his writing. His most famous story, and his first published, is "Trilobites." A young man — Colly — is torn between feelings of belonging where he is and the urge to make a new life elsewhere. "I was born in this place and I have never very much wanted to leave," he says at the beginning. What keeps him where he is is a feeling for each successive century of the Teays Valley since it was created out of the primordial soup. Since for most of those centuries the land was unpeopled, this sense is one of archaeology, not history. He collects fossils, but must buy



Breece D'J Pancake

them because he can never find them himself.

The family farm is for sale, and his out-of-state ex-girlfriend reappears to rekindle his anxious will to leave. The agony of Pancake's heroes is their failure either to leave West Virginia or to be reconciled to staying.

U.S. 60 passes through Milton and dominates the town, as it dominated Breece Pancake's imagination. It is a powerful reminder that the way out is available at any time. The town is built around this wide road, which could take a traveler hundreds of miles in either direction.

Most of the important buildings in Milton stand on U.S. 60, which since Pancake was a boy has become the familiar "strip" of many American cities, with fast-food restaurants and illuminated signs.

Helen Pancake, Breece's mother, matches familiar places in Milton with places in Breece's stories, after they have been filtered through the dark glasses of Breece's fictional imagination. In "The Honored Dead," a young man smokes a cigarette in the dawn glow and feels guilty about not going to Vietnam like his friend did. That's the steps of the old bank building in Milton, where the men would congregate and talk on summer evenings.

In Pancake's stories, every site that seems pleasant and old-fashioned in Milton is transformed into somewhere hellish and confining.

"It doesn't take long to tour Milton, I can tell you," Mrs. Pancake said, on a recent drive around the town. She recalled the parades that used to pass down the main street parallel to U.S. 60. There were Boy Scout troops and antique cars, but the parade no longer takes place. "Just about anything's quit any more," she said ruefully.

U.S. 60 winds as far as Lewisburg and further south. It appears in "Time and Again," in which a snowplow operator picks up a young hitchhiker, but the section of the road Pancake considers here is the dangerous, winding, mountainous stretch between Gaulty Bridge and Ansted.

"Time and Again" is the most puzzling story in "The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake." The key to the story is provided by his mother, who recalls that Breece wrote the story after he had read about a series of murders that had taken place along that stretch of road. A young soldier had been murdered and thrown off a mountainous crag into the New River. The snowplow driver is the killer. He contemplates murdering the hitchhiker but restrains himself.

A close childhood friend of Breece was Robert Jackson, assistant vice president of the Bank of Milton. As boys, Jackson and Breece looked so much alike they were often mistaken for each other. Pancake used Jackson as a model for Chester, a character in his story "The Salvation of Me."

"Chester was smarter than any shithouse mouse because Chester got out before the shit began to fall. But Chester had two problems: number one, he became a success, and number two, he came back," the story opens.

Robert Jackson left Milton for a time to work for a bank in New York. In "The Salvation of Me," the restless young man who narrates the story reflects enviously and rather contemptuously on Chester's success. Chester cheats him in a deal involving a used car.

Sitting in his office at the Bank of Milton, with an Apple Computer at his side, Jackson said he read the stories in January of last year for the first time. "I knew it (Chester) was me," he said.

"It made for a very depressing

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winter. I was somewhat saddened by the fact that I had come from the same upbringing but saw life from such a different perspective."

Shortly after that he took Helen Pancake into the safe at the Bank of Milton and asked her, "Did he really feel that way about me?"

"No," she said, "That's where the fiction came in. He loved you, Robert."

For Pancake, Robert Jackson represented someone who succeeded in uprooting himself, something the characters in his stories persistently fail to do.

Helen Pancake recalls how the story came to be written. "He gave us (Breece's late father and Mrs. Pancake) stories to read, and then he would leave us. Then he would come back and say, 'What do you think? Tell me the truth.' Pop would say, 'It's a good story, but you're writing above the average man's head.'

"Breece raised his blond eyebrows and said, 'I'm not writing for the average man.'"

Helen found the stories very somber. "Why don't you write something funny?" she asked. So he wrote "The Salvation of Me."

"I laughed and said, 'You go from one extreme to the other,'" Mrs. Pancake said after she read the story.

At the time he sold "Trilobites" to *The Atlantic Monthly*, Breece had uprooted himself from Milton. He was a graduate student at the University of Virginia, working toward an master's of fine arts degree. His teacher, Richard Jones, a British novelist who taught in November at the University of Charleston, organized a party for Breece to celebrate the sale. "He was extremely happy," Jones said. "But we knew he had a very dark side, a self-doubt. He very subtly undersold himself. It was impossible to know why."

On the day he died, Palm Sunday 1979, Breece was living in a rented cottage at Charlottesville. For a reason no one has conclusively explained, Breece walked into a neighbor's house. The neighbor, carrying groceries, was shocked to find Breece sitting alone in her house. She started shouting and called the police.

Mrs. Pancake believes he was sleepwalking, which she says he often would do when he was "taxed."

The cottage was rented from a family called the Meads. "Mrs.

Mead absolutely got up his nose. She was a very modish, worldly lady. She would give a cocktail party and emerge in silks and satins from New York. She brushed Breece the wrong way. He himself was very plain and overdid the plainness. He was always trying to disguise from people how clever and perceptive he was," Jones said.

Being roused so roughly may have released all of Breece's darkest thoughts. He went back to his own house, where Mrs. Mead questioned him about the incident. He took a lawn chair and one of his prized guns and dispatched himself. In his last moment, he could hear a siren.

"It would appear that Breece saw himself as grossly misunderstood. On this occasion, this probably tilted his behavior," Jones said.

There was a half-finished letter on his typewriter and a shopping list taped to his dashboard on the day he died, his mother recalled. There was no sign that he was anything but very much in the middle of things, not at the end.

The paperback edition of "The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake" was published this month by Owl Books. The price is \$6.95.