

# Elephant ears & coal fireplaces

## *Saratogan Trees*

Kenneth Hutcheson  
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Kenneth Hutcheson weaves a wonderful story of a young boy growing up in the small mill village of Saratoga on the eve of the Second World War. This was once the name of a real mill village in Albertville, Alabama and was once Hutcheson's home.

The story takes us to a place of small four room houses, coal burning fire places, and mothers doing the family washing in big black pots in the yard. We are allowed into this world of clean swept dirt yards, where a plant known to all Southern mill hills called Elephant Ears grow. It is a world of bare feet, after the ground warms in early May, and the constant sound of running machines at the mill providing background music for the people as they go about their daily business.

Here Ark, or more formally Arthur, and his little brother Crackers, and a niece named Nell are observers and participants in a series of events that will, in the end, change all their lives—for both good and bad. The story is filled with fictional family and village characters representative of any Southern mill town or village one might select at random from the hundreds that stretched across the South from Lynchburg, Virginia

to the depths of Mississippi.

There is a grandfather, uncles, a mill village intellectual and bullies. Ark's family, like so many others in this unique world, is a pieced-together, extended family. Ark and Crackers are being raised by their mother after their father's death. But this is no

modern tale of a "single mom." Ark's grandfather lived just a short distance away in the country. His two uncles and an aunt are almost daily figures in the children's lives. Finally, there is the larger village itself, a place where help was close by and plentiful.

An uncle provides Ark with a wise and honorable example of manhood and a protector. Many Southern themes of race, mobs and vengeance are woven into the story. But in the end the book is about a young boy's passage to manhood, as the South and its cotton mill world was entering its own passage to another place. In its own right the story stands as a good read, but it doesn't stop there. The author does something more; Hutcheson insists on providing a historical and folk context to the tale.

The old Saratogan existed in a complex dual world: it was a small mill village on the edge of a larger New South town. While the village was a self-contained world of its own, it had to turn to the town for its kids' education and its purchase of needed goods. The author makes it clear those of the town looked down on those of the mill. But he does not allow this to become the central issue. Beneath the skin both the town and the mill village were shaped by the same past. Both were products of one of America's first frontiers: the South's backcountry.

Bulldozers and arsonists are rapidly removing all physical traces of such places as Saratogan from the map. This is a profound error that present and future generations will live to regret. Robert Stips in his article "Conservation of Place" makes a powerful argument against such destruction. Stips points out that place is "essential to the survival of the human spirit and personality."

We no longer live in a world of unlocked doors and knowing everybody on every street. We no longer live in a world where poverty was never an excuse for crime, and few crimes existed. We now live under something one president called the "New World Order." This book reminds us that progress is not always our most important product.

—Jim Rumley  
Cooleemee, NC

