Happy birthday, W.Va., and many happy returns

Happy 135th birthday, West Virginia.

If you knew you were going to last this long, would you have taken better care of yourself? That's an old joke, but it works — sometimes.

Is it true what my son used to say about you when he was 4 years old? He used to sing "Country Roads," the song about you that John Denver made famous. When he got to the part that goes "Life is old there," he'd sing it "Life's an old bear."

Dave PEYTON

Life hasn't been easy for you, has it? Born in the midst of the Civil War, the worst tumult this country has ever seen, you were ripped from Virginia, a state in rebellion, by Abe Lincoln and his friends.

They tweaked your boundaries a bit and probably brought some people who were Southern sympathizers, if not out-and-out rebels, into the new state that was still loyal to the Union.

West Virginia was divided in its loyalties through the Civil War. It set the stage for tribalism that exists to this day among your people. And that suited the folks who wanted your wealth just fine. A divided state is a state that can be conquered, controlled and plundered.

And plunder they did.

From the robber barons to the coal barons to the modern political barons, your vast wealth and talented people have been ripped from you for more than a hundred years. Coal, oil, gas, timber — the fuel that fired the industrial revolution — came from your belly. Outsiders made vast fortunes and left nothing but scars on your landscape and a long history of disrespect.

Mine wars, natural disasters, manmade disasters, political corruption — they've taken their toll. Life for you has truly been a battle with the old bear for far too long.

But you survive. And still I love you.

I love your deep mountain hollows where the wild ginger and moss cover the cool moist earth.

I love your scraggly rock spires at the Mouth of Seneca in Pendleton County that look like church steeples reaching heavenward in a psalm of praise.

I love your Greenbrier River, one of the last clean wild-flowing rivers, and the deep dark forests that cascade down the mountains to the water's edge.

I love your rolling farmlands in Monroe County and your razorback ridges in Wyoming County.

I love the view of you from the nearly bald mountaintop at Snowshoe in Pocahontas County where, on a clear day, you can see undulating ridges, like waves frozen in time, rolling to the edge of the world.

You're special, West Virginia. You never belonged to Virginia. While the tidewater Virginians claimed you, the real West Virginians, the people who settled you, kept a deed for you in their hearts. And they passed it on to those who promised to love you and submit to your magic.

That which doesn't kill us, makes us stronger, or so it's said. Perhaps that's your secret. The old bear that has stalked you since the day you were born has only enhanced your charm, your beauty and your essential goodness.

There's no taming you, West Virginia. Stay just as wild as you are and never, never give in to the old bear.

Dave Peyton is a columnist for The Herald-Dispatch. His telephone number is 526-2790 and his address on the Internet is dpeyton@ezwv.com