

# MYSTERY AND MAJESTY IN WASHINGTON COUNTY

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THE time has come for me to leave these shale knobs and limestone valleys that somebody, sometime, years ago, carved out of the Appalachians, drew political lines around, and called Washington County. Departure evokes memories, and memories evoke a tribute. One man, at least, has found the boundaries of the county to enclose a region that is broad and wide and rich and deep. Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, "I have travelled a good deal in Concord." One may travel extensively in Washington County. Louis Agassiz, the consummate naturalist, once remarked, "I spent the summer travelling. I got halfway across my backyard." I think perhaps as the days have flowed into weeks, the weeks into seasons, and the seasons to years, I have travelled not yet halfway across the county. It was on a Monday long since past that I sought out the solitude of the high, tri-county massif of Whitetop and its twin in our sister counties, Mt. Rogers. Earlier, my introduction to Whitetop was the panorama from Bear Tree Gap. Then sunny autumn colors of every hue were capped by glistening white. An early snow filled the high crestline meadow. But now she was in a grey, stormy mood. In the blackness of a gathering storm my upward steps were halted by a thunderbolt crashing too near for comfort. The air now saturated with the odor of ozone, I turned to retrace my steps, driven down by the eerie storm, but left with an abiding sense of wonder.

Returning on a Tuesday later, the mute evidence first began unfolding to me of an ancient and far greater violence of mother nature there, the rocks known as the Mount Rogers volcanics. These rocks of pre-Cambrian ages that number into hundreds of millions of years—rhyolites, basalts, tuffs—remain to testify of nature's wilder moods preceding a hundred times over the arrival of man. The wonder burned into my soul in microseconds by the fury of the lightning bolt deepened as I held in my hand a fragment of an altered lava from 500 million years, speckled with phenocrysts, and thought of the fire and fury in which these Balsam Mountains were born. Who can disentangle the enigmatic red boulder conglomerate west of Konnarock—the whence and the why of rounded granitic boulders and cobbles of aplite and greenstone all frozen in a siltstone matrix? Why is this rock here, anhydrite and gypsum at Plasterco, marcasite at Alvarado, and dogtooth spar in veins along Beaver Creek? How strange to peer into a petrographic microscope at a wafer thin section of rhyolite porphyry from the angular blockfields on Whitetop's slopes and to watch the crystals wink on and off with the rotating stage! What secrets of earth, her past and present, are hid in her wind and her rocks!

On a Wednesday now and on Wednesdays again and again, the chipmunks play outside my study window, scamp-

ering after each other when they have their fill of the hickory nuts in the church yard. Easily a sackful of the little striped fellows live within sight of the desk where I am supposed to busy myself with work, placed there either by the Creator to punctuate my studies with amusement, or by the tempter to divert my wandering mind. If Whitetop leaves a sense of antiquity, secrecy, and wonder, the memory of the chipmunks adds to life a pure and instantaneous delight.

Thursday was it?—I cannot quite recall; but the weekday doesn't matter—that I poked amongst the mosses at



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I investigated the clandestine affairs of a fox the night before.

Sandy Flats, reveling mostly in my ignorance. I collected a dozen to examine more closely, later to learn that I had made a discovery indeed. Not a discovery, to be sure, that would excite the world, but it was discovery enough to etch another permanent memory. Just mosses, they seemed, though what is so uncommon as a common moss—gametophyte and sporophyte, seta, capsule, peristome, operculum, and calyptra. Wherefore was so much labor spent on small things? Just mosses? But wait: the most minuscule of all, half an inch high, the trained eyes of a bryologist, Dr. A. J. Sharp, were to spot as *Campylostelium saxicola*, a rare species otherwise quite unknown in the state of Virginia and collected but once or twice in all the South. And I, only I, had stumbled over it, in a secluded spot known only to me, the moss, and God.

A wintry Friday morning once was quite consumed in business not my own, investigating the clandestine affairs of a fox the night before. I hastened to sort out his string straight tracks in the light snow, before the warming sun should erase them forever. From the den in the limestone

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Hawks in migration soar high over Clinch Mountain.

bluff, to the scent post by the creek, thence through the pawpaws and up the hill toward the cornfield he went. The round of the shocks was interrupted by the pursuit of a rabbit. The rabbit, though, had escaped into the brush in a profusion of tracks. Neither I, nor, so I judged, could the cunning of the fox discover into just what bush or hole he had found his safety. So it was back to breakfast on an ear of corn. A full morning of travel that was, after a full night, and all in Mobley Hollow. I never knew you could travel quite so far so near home, an itinerary learned from a grey vixen.

It came to pass on a grim Saturday that I stood in the shelter of the church, hardly out of the furious rain, watching a fast moving front drive scud torn from larger clouds through the tree tops. The Whitetop storm the year before was born of thermals generated in the county, but here was a menacing visitor from afar. A Texas born storm was eddying eastward along the front of a mass of polar air, propagating itself across a thousand miles, driven by energies released a continent and a half away in the Canadian wastes of the Mackenzie River. Now it passed over my head, onward and eastward into the sea. How vast are the powers that range and sometimes rage over and round us in these square miles of home.

Sunday once, again in new fallen snow, early out and on the way to church, I chanced upon a compacted covey of quail, ringed tail to tail, just aside the gravel road. Surely that was a curious place to huddle together for warmth and protection. Suddenly the close knit covey, glimpsed but moments, became forever one of the pictures that I will not forget. A dozen pairs of eyes met mine in an encounter that somehow went right to the nerve of life itself.

So the weeks have flowed on into months, and the months into years.

On a January afternoon, in a pensive mood, I crouched out of a raw east wind in the lee of a tumbledown shack for another unexpected encounter, this time with a tiny chickweed blossom that had found before me the shelter of the southwestern exposure. Foolish flower, this is January! Noxious weed, why must you invade a deserted farmyard? *Stellaria media*, five cleft petals spread wide, was mute, yet in its muteness eloquent enough to stir me anew with lines from Wordsworth's ode:

"To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

A sunny February day I devoted to unraveling the mystery—for I at least did not know whither it led—of a forgotten trail up the flanks of Holston Mountain northeastward from where it passes over into Virginia. It ended only not to end, as it linked with the all but interminable Appalachian Trail. Who would have supposed that before its

junction on the crest, it would take me by a pond high on a mountain spur? The pond was filled with a hundred—could it have been a thousand?—frogs, all arguing with voices that could be heard half a mile along the mountain-side that spring was bound to come.

But never was I quite convinced of spring until I sighted, inevitably in March, two of our county's humblest weeds and most ambitious harbingers of spring. In the pasture across from where for years I lived, March belongs to the tiny Whitlow-grass, *Draba verna*, and to the Bitter Cress, *Cardamine hirsuta*. Crowded out of the best of the spring by larger plants and grasses, they flourish earlier, doing nobody any good except themselves and me, flourishing in their diminutive way for their own inherent worth in the March wind and sun, and reminding me year after year that spring simply could not be gainsaid. They disappear the other eleven months, presumably as the microscopic seeds lie fallow in the earth. But return they will March after March after March until the sun is past a century.

Well do I recall my initiation into one of the secrets of ten thousand Apriils on Iron Mountain. I lugged back from the trail up the Cuckoo a lonesome plant, a sizeable clump of narrow, dark green leaves with a simple white flower at the summit of a scape. It had a naked, uncommon look. I, then the newcomer here, found that I had presumptuously uprooted an inhabitant of that locale for a century of centuries. This was Frazer's Sedge, *Cymophyllus Fraseri*, a relict species from geographical antiquity. Its structure is primitive. Only a few plants survive the pressure of competition that evolution has since developed. Reproducing unchanged while all else has changed round about it, Frazer's Sedge has been abandoned and by-passed, reduced to an anachronism and counted among the dozen rarest plants in our area.

The woods come alive in May, and here my every May has been crammed with beauty: the brilliant crimson of Fire Pink, *Silene virginica*; the delicate white of Rue Anemone, *Anemone thalictroides*, the lacy look of the Foamflower, *Tiarella cordifolia*, or the dainty but vast profusion of Fringed Phacelia, *Phacelia fimbriata*, a specialty of these southern mountains that finds its northernmost limit along our county's high northeast boundary. The Flowering Raspberry, *Rubus odoratus*, has a purple all its own; an alternate shade belongs only to the violet Wood-Sorrel, *Oxalis violacea*. Orange is monopolized by the Flame Azalea, *Rho-*

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The author (left) and T. W. Finucane at Mendota firetower during a fall hawk migration.



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*dodendron calendulaceum*, which seems resolved to explore the spectrum of all the oranges. He who is sated with the color of May can ponder the lore of its flora. The Whorled Loosestrife, *Lysimachia quadrifolia*, has opened its little yellow blossoms since our pioneer fathers placed it on the yokes of their oxen teams to make them work in harmony! By May you can predict the weather with the Poor Man's Weather Glass, *Anagallis arvensis*, because the plant reflexively closes its quarter inch scarlet petals with the approach of a storm. The secretive flesh-brown flower of *Asarum canadense* leads to a race of wild ginger. The smell of the Garlic-Mustard, *Alliaria officinalis*, that grows by the North Holston riverbanks is surpassed only by the rank strength of the ramps, *Allium tricoccum* of Whitetop. How often have I pondered the weird, wild loveliness of a Lady Slipper, *Cypripedium acaule*, or plucked from the crevices of trailside stones the exquisite wild Lily of the Valley, *Convallaria montana*, to be plunged, as was Tennyson, down into the depths of being itself.

"Flower -in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies,  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand  
Little flower—But *if* I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is."

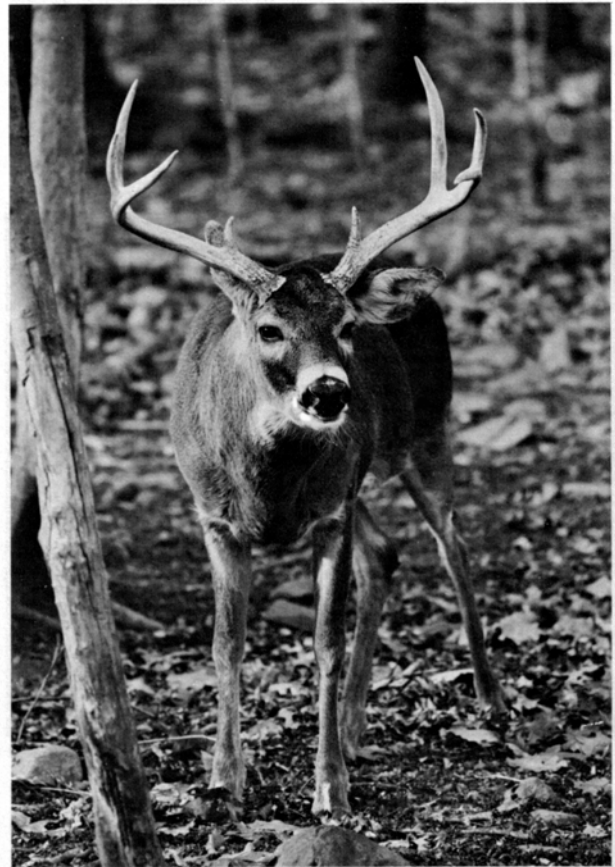
A hot and sultry June afternoon I spent at the seashore, and that still in Washington County. Sea shells, *Dicellomus*, lie yet buried in the mud in which they fell in the Paleozoic past. Our landlocked county was then the shore of an ancient sea, and these feeble folk were our ancestors here. I unearthed the fossil brachiopods one summer day from the crumbling shales where they had slept for half a billion years. The changes of time compacted the sediment to rock, and the rock buckled upward, and the seas receded. The Appalachians rose from the sea. A million million rains washed and washed to strip away the overburden, peeling off the layers above, and exposing the shale. Now and again its marine cargo weathers out so anomalously far from the sea. Fossil sea shells where Mumpower Creek cuts the Nolichucky shale in Big Ridge north of Bristol? Yes, they are there—small but unmistakable relics of a Cambrian fauna, tokens of a remote abysm in time when these hills of home were conceived in a watery womb subsequently to be brought forth in the labor of the Appalachian orogeny.

Once upon a July twilight I was gifted all undeserved with the loveliest of sunsets. The sun plunged behind the old snag that stood as a sentinel halfway up the western knob on the skyline near home, terminating the day with a blaze of glory that fired an orange red across half the spacious firmament. It was as though the sinking sun had resolved to exhaust itself in activity and color. Dusk was spent in hues of crimson and violet that lined the deep purple stratocumulus, then to yield to encroaching darkness, but not before a bit of that July became part of me forever.

In August darkness, once, I was meddling again, prowling about the haunts of a screech owl who dwelt in the old big willow on Sinking Creek. Binoculars in hand, I knelt behind an overgrown post in the fencerow, eyes glued to an owl-sized opening well up the trunk. The darkness was falling rapidly now, yet I hoped to spy the little fistful of feathers whose tremulous whinny so disrupted the silence of the night. I could have spared myself the bother of the binoculars, for we soon enough met in closer contact than seemed hospitable. Meddling I was, but I meant no harm;

yet the owl misread my intentions, or resented my peeping, and attacked me. Out of the hole he (or could it have been a she?) came, a tufted rufous projectile propelled by a silent gunpowder, swooping into my head and hair, wings flapping, talons curled, and finishing with a shriek that must somehow lie behind the rebel yell. The grumpy little night owl dwells yet, for all I know, in the willow in the bend of the creek. That one spot in Washington County has for me an early curfew. It's been off my limits ever since.

The broadwinged hawks fly south over us in September, diurnal birds of prey that have been my symbols of the wild and the free. They, I ought to add by contrast, never seemed to resent my curious watches. September 22, 1962, I lay flat on my back on a rock outcropping in the sunshine of a still day, sprawled across the county line, high atop Clinch Mountain at the Mendota Firetower. The bin-



L. L. Rue III photo

One October day I got the drop on an old buck.

oculars were necessary now; even with them I strained higher still to mere specks of grey in the blue and white of the early autumn sky. Counting with me was T. W. Finucane, ornithologist and co-ordinator of the fall hawk count. "Wow, there must be hundreds of hawks up there!" I exclaimed, realizing the size of the flight. I counted rapidly, scanning the open distance ahead to make sure I had spotted the lead hawks. This one was ideal for counting, strung out in a narrow line that followed the mountain crest. Fifteen minutes later, with a chain of hawks past us a mile long, the flight cut off at 830. Earlier they had come in low, pausing at the tower to circle for altitude. After a lull, more followed. By the close of the day, we had the

highest count in the history of observation at the Mendota tower, 2,369 broadwings, which with a handful of redbills, ospreys, and other hawks brought the total to 2,379 hawks. Annually since, a couple or more September days I have reserved as the self-appointed inspector of hawk flights over the Clinch, and I have done my duty well. I remember only one owl, but hawks by the thousands; 4941 hawks, mostly broadwings, but others as well, Cooper's, sharpies, redbills, ospreys, redshouldered hawks, a few marsh hawks, and a solitary eagle have been my portion of the 25,758 birds of prey counted by observers since 1959 from the wind-swept tower.

October has always converted me into a deerstalker. Just above Shaw Gap in Feathercamp woods I inched upwind through the yellow and red of hickory and oak in the fall. I heard it; then again I didn't—a rustle that seemed something more than just a breeze. An hour of slow motion stealth brought me not a hundred yards. But my quarry was unaware. I had the drop on an old buck, surrounded by three doe and a couple of fawns. Would that I had my grandfather's Winchester back home on the rack! But the season was not yet open. Maybe it was just as well, for the longer I watched, the more I had to remember: eight points counted and recounted, the twitch of their tails, their nervous looks, the suckling fawns. After half an hour's intimacy with the stag and his own, a careless step and a snapped twig spooked them all. The memory ends in a snort and a half dozen white tail flags. But on the return there was one reward more. There, on the trail, like a barefoot human, was unmistakably the print of a bear. Shades of Wilburn Waters!

It seemed hardly worth the bother one grey mid-November day to look again at the sterile, thin, cut-over woods in the nearby knobs. Can any good thing come from Mud Hollow? From Mock Knob? I had long since put it down as rotting stumps and brush. Home I came almost empty handed, collecting nothing more than a few tiny mushrooms from inside a doty log. Perhaps because I had so little, I looked more closely. It was the plainest of toadstools, tiny and tan, until that evening late I turned off my study light to discover the weird-green luminescence of *Panus stypticus*. Cap and stalk and especially the gills gave off a soft luminous fire. The faint cold light that braved the winter's dark left me a surviving glow. Who can tell why this uncanny emanation lights a rotting log?

Late in December and late in the day, years ago now, I overlooked from afar the length and breadth and depth of the county in which I have rooted so deeply. The day was spent in the climb up High Knob, visibility zero. Rime ice covered all, and fog covered that. At the summit, the cloud cover thinned; the late evening sun was beginning to set. I stood aloft and clear. At my feet a pillowy cumulus sea filled the intervening miles southeastward, masking all terrain until it washed the flanks of the Clinch. Beyond, everything was crystal clear, the rare visibility of cold winter skies after rain. In a single gaze I embraced Mendota eastward to Beech Mountain and Whitetop. From Tumbling Creek, and the tower on Hayter's Knob, I swept to Brumley and Hidden Valley, then over the county and across the valley to Holston Mountain. A fair landscape indeed! What wonders and pleasures lie in the realm your boundaries enclose, from the majesty of Abrams Falls to the mystery of Ebbing Spring, from limestone sinks to green pastures and templed hills. *De profundis!* What abundance and splendor are compacted here! Lord, bid time and nature gently spare these hills that once were home.