

Up That Mountain
By:
Robert Bodendorf

Walk with me—let’s go up Quarles Mountain, past the pastures of tall grass and through the oak and locust trees that dance to the wind’s tune. Still higher up, the brush thins out, and there is more space between trees than before. We look out to the Blue Ridge Mountains that give us our horizon. It seems those blue ridges are our rivals, but in reality we are much lower than they are. Still, the mountain feels like a seat of power, as we are looking down upon ridges that run away and back toward each other in their descent to the bottom. And yet, there are times when I feel out of place. Sometimes, I feel I don’t belong there anymore.

I grew up in a log cabin on Quarles Mountain, in Orange, Virginia. Orange is a town that sits in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. A thirty-minute drive south lands you in Charlottesville. My dad came to this place twenty-five years ago and immediately built a log cabin. Before you start thinking I grew up in a raccoon-skin hat on dirt floors, let me assure you this “log cabin” is not made of felled trees, and we do not have open air fires in the living room. Some visitors comment on its rustic quality, probably because it includes a huge stone fireplace made out of rocks smoothed by the Rapidan River. The back deck provides a view down the mountainside, through the hardwood trees, over the rolling pastures, to the blue ridges in the distance. And though there’s central heating, expect to find stacks of firewood piled high all around the house. Some stacks, I’m sure, still remain far out in the woods, waiting to be discovered and put to use. It’s a lazy place, where the leaves change reluctantly, where the snow melts only

after days of the sun's coaxing. Everything gets done slowly here, and as a person who begs, sometimes out loud, for a chance to be lazy, I like that. The best days are not the days when I head out into the forest to split firewood. Instead, the best days are when there's a fire in the fireplace (not made by me), stockings hung from the black walnut mantle, and snow falling outside. Maybe none of those details are necessary except the snow, because when there's snow, there's no work. Are you getting the idea that we're lazy?

When I was just a kid, mom would sweep me out of the house with a push and a "go outside and play." But that was never really a punishment to me. With forty acres of woods, valleys, rocks to climb, streams to splash in, and trails to follow, it was pretty easy to "go outside." Maybe I was a Marine on a mission, or a frontiersman just trying to scrape by, or an understudy of Indiana Jones looking for dinosaur bones while avoiding spears and arrows slung from natives' hands. Lately, I've not been a soldier, or a cowboy, or an adventurer, but just a walker, scanning the mountain I know well, looking for clues to where my childhood has gone. Sometimes the time, the memories go when the land gets logged, sometimes when it gets sold. The 'big hill' where we used to sled by moonlight and bonfires is now covered in corn stalks. And the pasture is now halved by an electric fence because our neighbor needed a little more grazing land for his cattle.

The mountain has weathered the history that was made on it. Five minutes from Orange and two minutes from my house, the small village (yes, it's *actually* a village) of Rapidan changed hands fifteen times on Christmas Eve of 1863 ("Historic Orange, Virginia"). Robert E. Lee worshipped in the town in that winter of 1863-1864, and the

church he worshipped in still stands today (“History”). We find campfire bricks and Civil War bullets every now and then, but who’s to say whether a Union or Confederate soldier fired them? Now, the most activity the mountain gets (besides the occasional logger) is the rare fox hunt, when beagles pour down the mountain and split around our cabin like traffic around a median. A rider in full fox-hunting garb, complete with a red riding jacket and a muffin-top black helmet, crashes down after them.

Except for the occasional fox hunts, the mountain, like the town, is a quiet place. There’s not much for a young person to do, which is probably why young people are few and far between. There are a couple of bars, but they’re filled with husky farmers in Carhartt work pants and John Deere trucker hats. As a skinny kid in a button-down, khakis, and loafers, I don’t really fit into the Orange social scene. Often I reconcile myself to the mountain, where there’s not much to do, and sometimes it gets boring, even lonely.

There isn’t really any reason for me to go back there. Yet still I feel an indescribable pull toward the place. I sense an obligation to the mountain. I don’t know what will happen to the mountain if I leave. And much like the memory of the largely nonexistent snow on Christmas, perhaps the best years of living on the mountain are behind me, in my childhood. So, should I go back? I don’t know. I can’t answer that. I’m not a farmer or forester, and I doubt I ever will be. But I know that in the future, when people ask me where I’m from or where I grew up, I’ll say I grew up in a log cabin, on the side of a small mountain. I’ll say that because it’s a part of me now. My home helps

define me. Sometimes I wonder, can I ever find another place worthy enough to call home? I hope so. I want my children to grow up on a mountain like that.

Works Cited:

"Historic Orange, Virginia: The Place to be for History." *Historic Orange, Virginia: The*

Place to be for History. orangevirginia.org, Web. 8 Oct 2009.

<<http://www.orangevirginia.org/history.htm>>.

"History." *Orange, Virginia: Sweet Living, Steady Progress*.

<http://www.townoforangeva.org>, Web. 8 Oct 2009.

<<http://www.townoforangeva.org/index.aspx?NID=126>>.