

Off the Beaten Path

There is a saying that goes a little something like, "there's no place like home." This stands very true for our family farm that lies off the beaten path. This is where I grew up and where I learned about the importance of family, God, hard work and the beauty of nature. There is a certain grace and majesty about the great outdoors. Our Fort Valley farm nestled below the George Washington National Forest is my safe haven. No place in this world is quite as beautiful as Fort Valley while all four of the seasons take their toll on the surroundings.

There is nothing like the sound when the day breaks out in the woods in the early morning. The rustle of the leaves on a chilly fall day and the smell of hunting season in the air is comforting. While sitting in the middle of the woods back on the farm, bushy-tailed squirrels scurry through leaves and jump from oak tree to hickory tree leading you to wonder if that buck you've been waiting on is nearby. All of the leaves are changing to beautiful bright colors of orange, red and yellow while a few begin floating to the ground with every gust of wind that passes through. The peace and serenity of sitting in the woods watching the wildlife reminds us of the wonders God has created for us to embrace. The leaves are raked into mounds of crispy fall colors while the hay fields lie a flat gold after the summer cuttings. The whistling and deep roaring sounds of the Luray trains on the other side of the mountain are soon to be heard with the approaching winter weather.

The frosty air is finally here. Shimmering icicles that are long and short hang from the barn and silo and glisten in the early morning sun. Snow falls in little puffs leaving everything covered in a blanket of white. Bare trees with brown and gray bark stand tall with a coating of white clinging to every branch. The hike from the house to the barn sounds with the crunch of

snow under your feet while rabbits and squirrels run creating patterns in the snow while the cold air and winds brush against your face. Foxes with bushy tails decide to come out and join you as the smoke arises from the old farm house chimney in pillows of gray.

The snow has since gone and the bright morning sun shines through curtains in every room of the house while the returning birds chirp and sing their songs. There is a chill in the morning air to the early spring, but it does not compare to the cold of winter. Animals are coming back out to enjoy the new weather and roam the woods as you enjoy the first hike of spring. Roosters are crowing at daybreak and the cattle are roaming the pasture. The water in the troughs no longer frozen. The majesty of the mountains slowly returns to its emerald green. Flower gardens begin to blossom and bloom as the colors will soon explode from the buds. The creek, no longer frozen, glistens in the midday sunshine and makes trickling sounds as it flows through the woods in the middle of the farm. Spring gobblers are spotted through the sights of granddaddy's gun while sitting in the blind across the field, patiently waiting and hoping for the right one. The evenings are late and cool and summer is nearing.

Every dirt path and trail you walk on the farm is lined with the colors of the blossomed lilies, daisies, and tulips. The tall alfalfa grass sways in the breeze and resembles a golden sea. The sound of the tractors rumbling and plowing the fields is a sense of home and hard work as they make their rounds through the fields, row by row. A sharp cedar aroma fills the air and honeysuckle lines the dirt road. A warm summer breeze sways the leaves on the trees and whistles through the cracks in the wooden panels of the old barn. The hot sun is beating down and Passage Creek flows on through. The stream is trickling and making its way to the creek while a few trout are seen poking out from beneath the rocks. The weekends are spent hiking Signal Knob and Buzzard Rock, admiring nature's beauty with every step.

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This is the greatest place to be. There are many things to be admired amidst the beauty of the farm and the adjoining forest. The four seasons create their own style of grace upon the land as you spend your days hiking, hunting, fishing, and caring for the farm. Living in a place like Fort Valley is a reminder that nature is wondrous and every minute spent in its beauty should be embraced. After all, nothing compares to life off the beaten path.