(Appalachian Alternatives Occasional Essay)

THE MOUNTAIN

It had been a long time in coming to walk again the coves and ridges of southern West Virginia. Here, three miles up the right-hand fork of Rock Creek Hollow, was the two-story house with the native chestnut framing an joists, and the horseshoe-shaped mountain that had been in the family since 1896. At the base of the left-hand ridge, on a small knoll, were the graves of the patriarch John Rorrer and his wife Lessie Cantley Rorrer.

I returned in the spring of 1991 almost by happenstance after Orie Loucks asked me to come view the death in Edge of Appalachia Nature Preserve in southeastern Ohio. Loucks and a team of researchers had found dramatic decline in the black oak family and so few living hickories it was next to impossible to figure out what had happened to them. From there, driven by a desire to see what was occurring in the higher and richer environment of West Virginia, I had come home.

The families of trees that had thrived in this range for millions of years, some for tens of millions, had begun to leaf when, for the first time in forty years I climbed the mountain incised by five coves. At two-thousand feet, not a human noise to be heard, woodpeckers played taps on the insect-infested skeletons of oak, hickory, sassafras, yellow locust, linden or one of the ten or more additional species afflicted by disease in this remote sanctuary; free from population centers, unscarred by strip-mining, generally free of fire, not trod by cattle, last harvested in the early 1930s by John Rorrer using cross-cut saws, axes and a team of oxen.

Coming on the line fence posts, I thought of the old man who, when asked why he hadn't gone to work in the mines had replied, "I'll tend the earth but be damned if I'll gut it." The posts were made of yellow locust, still standing and fairly sturdy after half a century. The barbed wire was down under the weight of fallen trees, including a locust or two rotting prematurely, no sturdier it seemed in this environment than the hickories that had fallen in Edge of Appalachia Nature Preserve, rotting so rapidly there was no way to take a body count. Many of the new carcasses had no roots. It was as if they had fallen from their own weight, their foundation gone and with it their ability to stand up. Seeing this, the thought came that we had lost our collective minds, a reality later stated to me by author Charles Little:

"Scientists and others detected tree death and forest decline. So money started to flow to determine the relation of acid rain to the decline. Lo and behold there were some mismatches. Not every single shred of evidence proved that acid rain was the cause. Then a sizeable percentage of researchers and bureaucrats--a majority in fact--went completely soft in the frontal lobe. Their logic was this: One, the trees were dying. Two, there's a strong possibility that acid rain, and other forms of pollution, is a cause but the linkage cannot be proved in every conceivable respect. Therefore, the trees are not dying."

But they were. The death crossed the ages. Nor was it restricted to the naturally acidic ridges where the families of oak and hickory formerly had thrived but now were understood to be dying from acid rain. It also was found in the coves where for more than sixty million years the magnolias and other broad-leafed species had taken sanctuary against climate change, hiding out, moving up and down the slopes as the earth cooled and warmed, producing a museum of modern biological diversity. Within the canopy and understory of this mountain and neighboring mountains, could be found seventy or more species, lending the appearance and feeling of a temperate zone rain forest.

It was apparent from the distribution of the death that nature in the second half of the 20th century had decided to parse the forest into far fewer species or that humans had altered the system in which they grew. Blaming nature was far-fetched in light of the patience with which the diversity had evolved. Moreover, it was known from sediment studies and human history that only native chestnut had departed the forest as far back as could be discerned, this from a disease introduced from Europe. The chestnut had grown anywhere and everywhere. Remnants of it still were found on the ridges and in the coves, the skeletons showing more evidence of a root system after half a century of weathering than the new-fallen species which were disappearing with no public grief to mark their loss, as had occurred with the chestnut.

In the days that followed I walked in the coves and on the ridges of other homeplaces in the closed watershed of the home hollow; the Wills place, tended carefully for most of this century by Clarence Wills, the stewardship now passed on to his sons, John Perry and Jim Michael, and the Cantley place, whose caretaker Ed Cantley, snipped ginseng in the summertime so it couldn't be seen and dug in the fall. Finally, I came to the old Johnny Clay place. There I was reintroduced to the naturalist Joe Aliff who now owned it, the north- and south-side mountains, split by the narrow valley and creek, and the road that had been dirt when we were boys but now was asphalt.

The forest was a large portion of Aliff's life, like the naturalists of an earlier era who through what they saw left the seeds for modern environmentalism. He enlarged on what I was seeing, lending time and space to the death that seemed particularly virulent on his place. It had begun in native red mulberry and butternut walnut approximately forty years ago, then some fifteen years later had invaded the great mountain variety of black locust, the yellow and tight-bark hickory until presently hardly a single species was unaffected--not even weedy red maple or the yellow poplar that for reasons unknown had begun to lose its bark at the base.

The epidemic had introduced to Rock Creek and surrounding hollows an unwelcome phenomenon: the sound of falling trees on the quietest of days and nights; affirmation that they had no roots and were falling from their own weight, sometimes clothed, sometimes in domino fashion on the flanks of the coves and climbing ridges. In the weeks that followed, natives of other hollows confirmed the death.

"I cut trees for a living, so I've seen the mountains and they're dying," Danny Williams of Peach Tree Hollow told me. "It seems they're dying at the roots and just falling down. The oaks are dying and most of the yellow locust are down on the floor. Then, too, a lot of the living trees are hollow and have to be butted off when they're cut. I cut a red oak the other day that was rooted up. The root wad was like a mushroom, but the tree was solid. It was five feet in diameter, but it didn't have enough roots to hold it up. And you can see the hemlock is dying. All you can do is ask yourself, what tree is going to hit next."

As summer strode toward an uneven fall, it became apparent that pollutants other than acid were at work. Leaves of buckeye, the magnolias, sassafras, ash, sumac, beech, and others, began to color and drop in July and August, the work of ozone. Orie Loucks made two visits into the home hollow and into other hollows, advancing his understanding by what he saw. He had expected to find hickory and oak death on the ridges, but was taken aback by the mortality in the moist, rich coves where the angiosperms had evolved almost one-hundred million years ago, and from where had come the genetic well-spring for forest evolution in the Northeast and Midwest following those regions' experience with glaciation. The polluted mother forest, he concluded had lost its immune system to diseases and could be compared to the coal miner whose death is attributed to pneumonia but who in reality died from black lung.

After stories began appearing that many species were declining and dying, the acid rain logrolling of the 1980s began anew. Officially, the death couldn't be occurring because the U.S. Forest Service, and other government agencies, had concluded in 1990 that eastern forests, with the exception of spruce growing on the spines of the Appalachians, were in a state of good health, so the tens of thousands of new carcasses in Rock Creek Hollow, and all the other hollows, had come to an end because of fire, or cattle tracks, or successional conflict in second and third regeneration, and so forth and so on. Joe Aliff advanced his own hypotheses: the death was due to the mating dances of the newly-introduced flocks of wild turkey.

Aliff's mocking reasoning made about as much sense as the rest. The reality was, this great forest -- uninvestigated, not understood and unrecognized for its stature among global forests -- was evolving rapidly in its new artificial environment; from the oldest and biologically richest system in North America into an uncertain future of far fewer species and greatly diminished beauty, the loss of us all.

Seeing in the fall the invasion of anthracnose into wild dogwood, the flower of early spring, I remembered what the southern Appalachian researcher Robert Bruck had told me:

"The body is dead. The stories that follow will be epitaphs to the larger story."

John Flynn
Director of Communications
Lucy Braun Association
for the Mixed Mesophytic Forest
Star Route 19
Rock Creek, West Virginia 25174