

## My Second Home

Back in 1975, five high school buddies began a lifelong exploration of the Pisgah National Forest. Our first backpacking trip began at the Big East Fork Pigeon River trailhead. From there we hoped to walk the Shining Creek Trail up to Shining Rock. We were not very good at reading maps back then and spent most of Saturday searching for trail signs. It began to snow late that afternoon and we made a smart decision to set up camp in an open field, build a fire and enjoy the snowfall. We somehow survived that night in our inexpensive tents and cotton sleeping bags and drug them to the Scout the next morning. We carefully drove on an icy 276 to Brevard early Sunday and stopped at Hardee's for breakfast, glad to be safe and warm. The next year, we followed the Blue Ridge Parkway past Graveyard Fields, drove the Scout all the way to Investor Gap, then hiked into Shining Rock the easy way, on a relatively flat old railbed. The weather was perfect, complete with blue skies, cold sunrises, and glorious sunsets. That year, we somehow carried a four-man canvas circus tent to the top of the world, along with canned goods, cotton clothes, and an 18" metal grill. We had a lot to learn about backpacking equipment, clothing, and food. Over the next two decades, we became well-outfitted experts. I'll never forget the scene from Grassy Cove Top that Sunday morning as we walked the Art Loeb Trail back to the Scout. It was a 360-degree view of God's country, the winter Appalachians. For the next twenty years, we spent every February backpacking in WNC, mostly in Pisgah National Forest, usually in the Davidson River Valley. After three nights on the trail, we always looked forward to a hot meal at the original Pisgah Fish Camp on our way home on Sunday. With age comes bad backs, bad knees, and ineffective lungs. Our Full Moon February Expeditions became car camps at either Cove Creek or Kuykendall, and they continue today. February 2022 will be the 48<sup>th</sup> year. Each year someone goes into Brevard every day for supplies, and we have always found it to be a very hospitable town.

In the mid-2000s my wife Nan and I started camping in the fall with my sister Martha and her family at the Davidson River Campground. We were drawn out of the midlands of South Carolina by cooler air, colorful leaves, and warm fires. We experienced new adventures next to clear flowing streams, endless hiking trails, and outstanding views from the parkway. Each year we spent more time in Brevard dining and shopping, and for many years, it has been our spring and fall destination. This year was no exception. Two of my oldest friends and camping buddies made our campsite reservations in March and talked on a regular basis about the ideas we had for our camp in the mountains. Then, just weeks away, they backed out for various reasons. I was disappointed but continued my plans of spending another autumn in the Davidson River Valley.

The forecast called for rain Thursday and Friday with the sun on Wednesday and Saturday. I got out of town before noon on Wednesday and headed up I-26 on a beautiful clear day. We have had a Little Guy Five Wide teardrop camper for six years. On every trip, someone will start to pass me and then stay in my blind spot for a while. Eventually, they will move on down the road after taking pictures of the back of the camper. It reads, "I Go Where I'm Towed To." The trip to Brevard is just over two hours with one stop. I check in and set up camp before four o'clock, then head to the river for some late afternoon trout fishing. Earlier this year, there had been

disastrous flooding from Tropical Storm Fred. The river flowed over its banks and the campground was evacuated. The river is low now and the rocks near the shore are high and dry. I wade in ankle-deep, crystal-clear water, that in the springtime, is just below my knees. I fish hard, get several strikes and even land one nice hatchery Brown. The sun is dropping below the tree line when I head back to camp. Thanks to my store of dry paper, fat lighter and seasoned wood, I have a warm fire burning in no time. I enjoy several Oktoberfest Biers next to the flames as the beautiful day becomes dusk. Behind my camp the forest stretches for miles to the west. The Art Loeb Trail begins at the river and takes you all the way to Cold Mountain. Along the way, you pass Chestnut Knob, Cedar Rock, Butter Gap, Pilot Mountain and Black Balsam. The leaves are beginning to change and there are golds and muted reds scattered about the late summer greens. The woolly adelgid has decimated the Eastern Hemlocks of the Southern Appalachians over the past fifty years. There is one at the front of my campsite that was treated some time ago and still survives. Its trunk bears a worn blue blaze and a metal tag numbered 424 to identify it. The dusk becomes night, and the stars begin to appear in the heavens. The home-made black-eyed pea soup is delicious and warms my belly. For years I have had a Hudson Bay blanket that I wrap around my sleeping bag for warmth. This year I try putting it inside the bag and find it to be much warmer. Even old campers can learn new tricks. Sleep comes easy and I stay in the sack till close to eight, fix a bowl of shrimp and bacon grits for breakfast then head for the river. They had called for the rain to move in Wednesday night. Thursday morning is cloudy but still no rain. I get a strike on my first cast and miss it then slowly work my way down stream, making sure one foot is planted securely before moving the other. I get at least one more strike before loosing my favorite lure on an overhanging limb. My back up lure does not attract them, and I trudge back to camp having been skunked, though I did survive another walk through one of my favorite rivers without falling in. The rain starts slowly, it's 50 degrees, the fly on the Cabello's eight-man West Wind is tight, the camp is prepared for lots of rain. I've always loved the scene in the Harry Potter movie *The Goblet of Fire* when they attend a quidditch match and are camping in tents. From the outside they appear to be just A-framed two-man tents but on the inside, they are spacious shelters the size of small houses. I like a tent with plenty room for cots, chairs, and end tables. There are some that call it Glamping. I ride into town for gas and supplies, return to camp, and cook grilled cheese and soup in the Little Guy galley, then stretch out for a nap with the now steady rain beating on the tent.

I woke suddenly, listening to the pouring rain and intermittent tapping of heavy drops off the leaves. The sound was disconcerting, I was nervous for some reason. Lying there I realized that my heart was out of rhythm and checked my pulse to confirm it. My first thought was to go to a hotel, to get warm and relax, then maybe it would go back in rhythm. In all my years of camping, I had never had to visit a hospital, and I did not want to start today, especially by myself. After thirty minutes of debate, I finally decided the emergency room was my only option. I stopped at the gate to let them know what was happening, then drove slowly to the safety of medical supervision. It was a quiet day at the ER, and I was admitted immediately. The nurses were very attentive, the doctors were personable and professional. I was in good hands, glad to be comfortable and warm. They diagnosed me with my second episode of AFIB, put me on an IV to slow my heart rate, and hooked me up to a heart monitor. I was unable to call out on my phone but texted Nan to let her know what had happened. They brought me a phone that I could use to

call out and talk with her. She had planned to ride up Friday morning and camp with me, I urged her not to drive up that evening in the dark through a pouring rain. There were no rooms available in the hospital, but the staff brought a hospital bed in for my overnight comfort. Several years ago, I had spent a night on an ER gurney and never wanted to do that again. It was almost as bad as sleeping on the hard cold ground while backpacking. Two doctors consulted with me, and I even had a Teledoc session with a doctor in Ashville. I felt fine and tried to doze off and on during the night, in-between visits from the nurses. At about 4:30 AM I looked at the green lines on the heart monitor and they appeared to be in unison. I checked my pulse off and on and it felt normal. At about 6:30 AM a nurse came in and in a soft voice said, "you're back in rhythm." Those words were music to my ears. A few hours later, a doctor came in and said I would be released that morning. In years past it seems that being released from the hospital took a long time, not this morning. It was a quick process, and I was back at camp before twelve waiting on Nan and my sister Martha to arrive.

After two days of camping and spending time in the hospital alone, the hugs and smiles from family members were extremely welcomed. It was raining off and on and cold. We decided to go into town and have lunch at Rocky's Grill & Soda Shop. We enjoyed great burgers and hotdogs then shopped next door on the way out. I bought a coaster that read "Camping Without Beer Is Just Sitting in the Woods."

Martha retired this year from a career as a schoolteacher. She is in the process of marketing her award-winning pimento cheese. There is a lady in Greenville, SC that might be interested in selling some of Martha's Mena Cheese, so she heads back south to stop and talk with her. I feel fine and don't want to pack up that wet tent and go back home. Nan and I mummy up in our bags and take a nice nap with the droplets softly tapping on the tent.

We had dinner reservations downtown at 7:45 and decide to stop off at Oskar Blues for a pint. The brewery scene in WNC has exploded over the past ten years. Americans have learned the joys of spending time with friends or family, outside, tasting a fresh cold brew or cider. It is now common to see grandparents, young children, and sometimes infants in the family groups. Of course, the well-behaved canine family members are also welcomed. I order one of my favorite seasonal beers, Death by Coconut. We share a table with a couple from Ohio. Their daughter attended school nearby, and after visiting the area several times, they decided to buy a home and spend more time in Brevard. We ask about their favorite restaurants and she shared the names of several. He said that he had just asked her where they are eating that night. Our glasses were empty, we said goodbye and headed downtown. We arrived at Falls Landing early but were seated promptly. We were treated to a fine meal of fish and vegetables with excellent service. For years I was a camping purist, always being prepared and only going into town for emergencies, preparing all the meals and eating them next to the fire. Now, I thoroughly enjoy dining out, especially on cold dreary nights.

Back at camp, the fire is blazing in no time. We sit close to the flames, hand in hand, and watch the stars before they are hidden by a light cloud cover. We are thankful that we are not spending the weekend in a hospital room.

I sleep well and stay in the bag until close to nine. When I get up the clouds seem to be clearing and the sun is peeking out. I make a warm morning fire and fix some hot tea. We enjoy them both and plan the day. The first stop is a twenty-minute ride east on Highway 280 to Sierra Nevada Brewing. It's close to noon and the parking lot is almost full. There are no indoor dining reservations available for the next few hours, so we sit outside near the large gas fire pit and enjoy a half-pint of golden-colored brew. It was spitting rain, but the clouds were moving, and the sun kept trying to come out. We talked with a man from Chico California who was touring the east coast. He told us about the SN brewery in Chico and we both agreed that the Mills River Facility was world-class. Our glasses empty, we said goodbye. With his left hand, our new friend made the peace sign.

Our next stop was Burning Blush Brewery in Mills River, the name derived from an Edgar Allen Poe poem. We ordered half pints and sat on the covered patio. The sun was shining warm through the spitting rain. Cousins Maine Lobster food truck was there for the day, and we ordered clam chowder, lobster roll, and shrimp tacos. The cashier said that they had been at Craft and Drafts in Irmo and Columbia just yesterday. The chowder was delicious, the tacos were tasty, and the lobster roll was the real deal. We will track them online and hopefully be home the next time they are in the area. We drive back to Brevard, to walk around, and decide on where to have dinner that night. We find that the main intersection in town is blocked off, the annual Halloween Festival is in progress. The event was complete with carnival food, a costumed dog parade, a hula hoop attraction, and a young lady enveloped in silver standing on a platform in the center of the intersection of Main and Broad, tapping a snare drum with silver sticks. We wandered around looking at restaurants, enjoying downtown Brevard and the festive crowd. The afternoon is cloudy and cool. We head back to camp and take a warm nap.

We had dinner that night at Jordan Street Café. The staff was dressed in costumes adding to the day-long revelry. They offered a wide variety of local craft beers, and we drank one apiece. For dinner we ordered chowder, spinach salad and split a plate of fish and chips. The food was well prepared, the portions were generous, and once again the service was outstanding. The sky is clear and there is the faint glow of the sunset as we stroll back to the car. Not far from the turnoff to the campground we see bright lights on the side of the road. As we pass, we realized that it is mountain bikers with a light on their head and on the front of their bikes. A few minutes after we arrive at camp, a group of at least fifteen bikers cross the wooden bridge nearby and head up the North Slope Trail, their lights illuminating the dark forest. Mountain biking is a great daytime adventure, but at night, it's a daring exploit. We relish another warm fire under the stars and watch the bright flames slowly turn to glowing coals before retiring to the cots. A perfect day in WNC was ending just like it should, with my longtime wife and camping buddy at my side.

The sun is out Sunday morning and helps to dry the tent and shelter tops. We slowly stuff it all in the Little Guy then head for the house before noon. We sit in the driveway that evening, hand out treats to all the ghouls, Spidermen, and princesses that come by and make it through the night without any tricks. I see my cardiologist on Tuesday, and he prescribes Eliquis just in case I have another episode of Afib. Highland Brewing celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> year of Cold Mountain. I must restrain myself from overindulging now, but I do savor an occasional pint or two.

The 48<sup>th</sup> annual February Full Moon Rendezvous will probably be cold and wet, but I am already anticipating an early warm spring when there are many trout swimming in the river, new trails to explore, and mountain vistas to treasure while visiting my second home.

Having recently finished reading Harry Middleton's "The Earth is Enough," I am now convinced that it is and always has been.