# Down

*VISITING THE BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPE OF SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY RESIDENTS WHO LOST THEIR HOME FOREVER*

**BY BEN SWENSON**

The hidden treasure is in there somewhere, but we can't see it through all the underbrush. Greenbrier chokes the trail junction like razor wire. An ornamental shrub lovingly planted decades ago has turned feral, cloaking this sacred ground with impenetrable cover. We search beneath all this, fruitlessly at first until, at last, a discovery. "Here we go," someone shouts, and with clumsy high-stepping, we converge. There it is, a simple field stone buried vertically. Six feet east, another. What's left of a life, but more than that, what's left of a *way* of life and the heartbreaking saga of how this ground became one of the country's most beloved stretches of wilderness.

This is Shenandoah National Park.

Today more than a million visitors a year visit Shenandoah National Park, a long, crooked sliver that follows the spine of the northern portion of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. This forested park is accessible, being only a two-hour drive from the western fringes of Coastal Virginia and a little less from Washington, D.C. A big draw for people weary of urban landscapes is Shenandoah's remoteness, the fact that such wild and rugged terrain exists so close to the East Coast's urban centers. Of Shenandoah National Park's 199,100 acres, nearly 80,000 are federally-designated wilderness, and in the rest, development is strictly limited to roads, campgrounds and modest visitors' conveniences.

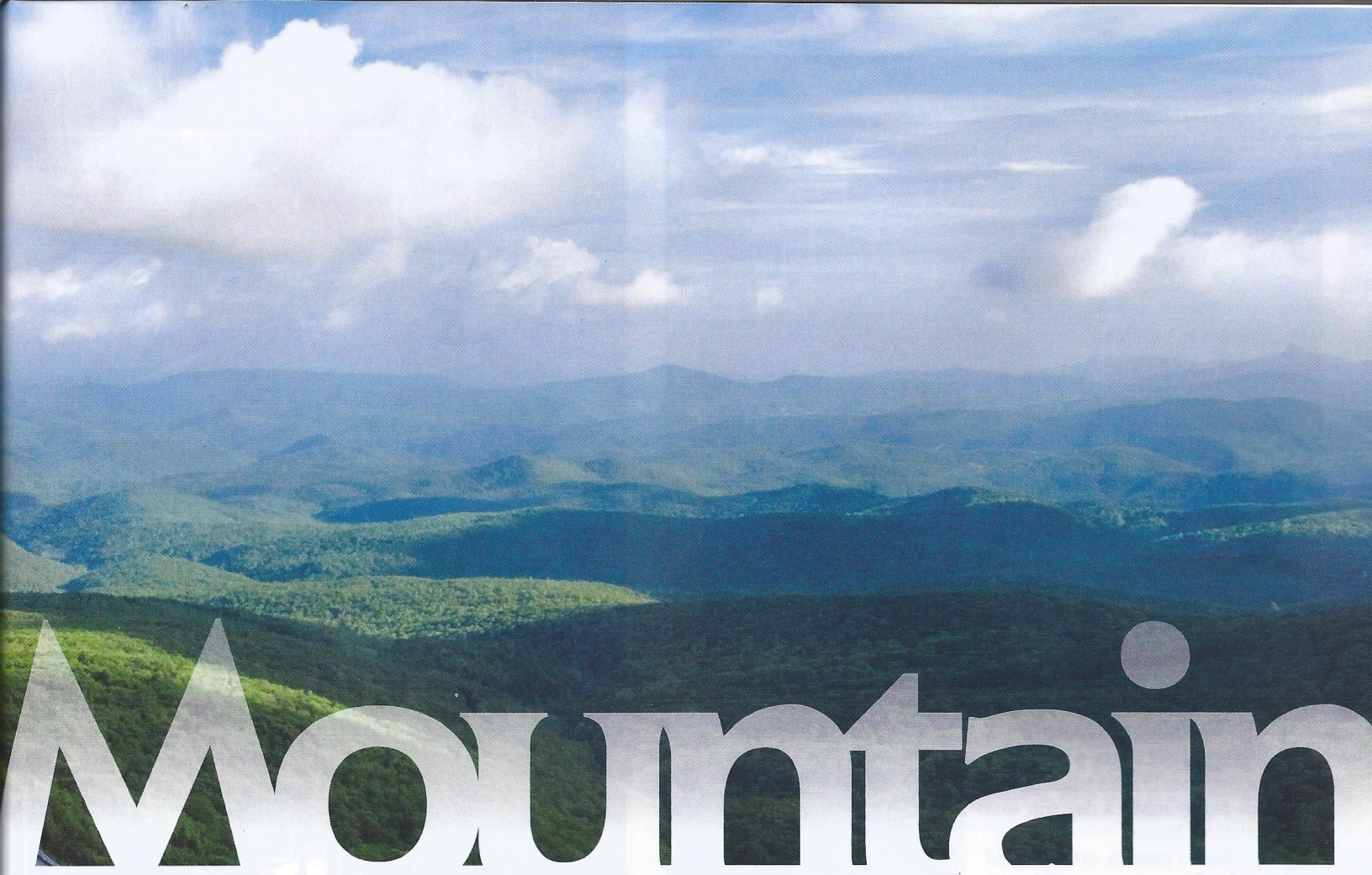
Yet Shenandoah National Park is, in a sense, an illusion, a landscape not as pristine or untrammeled as the verdant peaks first let on. For thousands of people, this land was once a home they loved and lost. Although the proud mountaineers who lived here have long since passed on, their footprints remain, and their removal, which often occurred unwillingly, is as much a part of Shenandoah National Park's identity as the protected preserve that came after them. Sue Eisenfeld has taken on the task of finding those traces and telling the stories that are now little more than a faint echo in these hollows.

A headstone appears among the leaves and scenery at Shenandoah State Park.

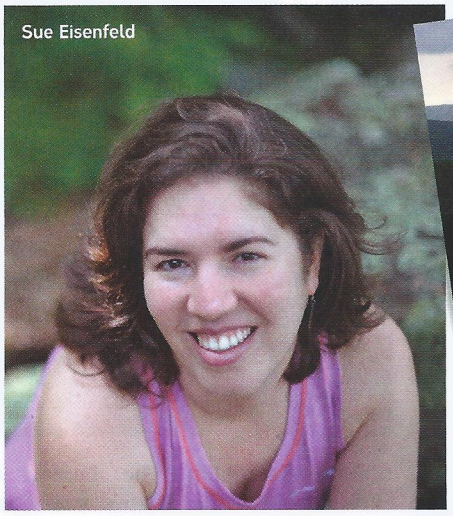
On a bright autumn day, I meet Eisenfeld and a five-person crew of off-trail hikers who are committed to chronicling Shenandoah National Park's former life. Eisenfeld, who lives in Arlington, is the author of *Shenandoah; A Story of Conservation and Betrayal* (University of Nebraska Press, $19.95). She has been tracking down the ghosts of Shenandoah's past for more than 20 years, a labor of love with rewards that are hidden on mountain slopes uninhabited for 80 years.

"People wonder why we do this over and over again, and I tell them that the park is limitless. There are always new things to discover," she says.

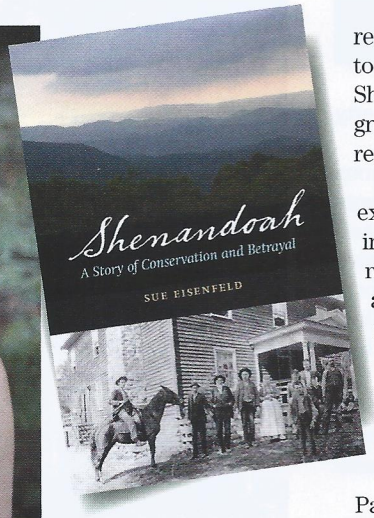
Long before our hike, Eisenfeld spent many years reaching out to the few original residents still alive, not to mention scores of their descendants who can attest to the special place these mountains once had in



# Mountain



Sue Eisenfeld




residents' hearts. She logged countless hours on genealogical forums and pored over archival records and correspondence. But there's really no substitute, she explains, for seeing the vanishing traces of these lives, for putting your hands on the same stones they did.

Our day begins bright and early at an inconspicuous trailhead along Shenandoah's eastern border. The dense forest swallows the sound of passing automobiles within a minute of walking into the trees. After a 15-minute hike uphill, we come to an overgrown cemetery, and Eisenfeld points out the field stones marking a single grave in some long-forgotten cemetery.

This is the Clark cemetery, she tells me, but like so many other burial grounds within the park, not much is known about the family that left this plot behind. The head and foot stones, which are the only visible reminders of the person buried here, give no answers; they're much too simple for inscription. Those markers are the first of many secrets Shenandoah has to reveal today—traces of hidden history that are poignant in their simplicity. And that simplicity, for the humble mountain residents who once lived here, was both a blessing and a curse.

In *Shenandoah; A Story of Conservation and Betrayal*, Eisenfeld explains that by the 1920s, families of mostly Scots-Irish descent had inhabited the Blue Ridge Mountains for nearly two centuries. While many easterners found the high-peaked, deep-hollowed terrain foreign and forbidding, the hardscrabble homesteaders who took root there relished in the freedom that isolation afforded and were content to live by means of subsistence agriculture and selling homemade products such as tanned hides and liquor.

The 1920s happened to be the period that talk of a national park within reach of the nation's capital picked up steam. The state and federal governments teamed up to make Shenandoah National Park a reality, but in the decade-long bureaucratic slog that ensued, few planners cared to ask inhabitants whose land would be part of the park what they thought of the idea of being relocated. The Commonwealth of Virginia was left to do the dirty work of condemning and seizing mountain properties and dealing with residents who refused to take the offer.

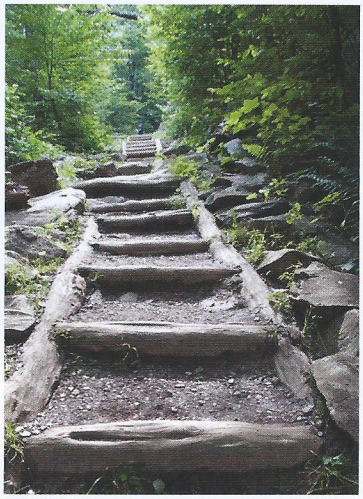
A peek into the population's perception of the mountain inhabitants is offered by the 1933 book *Hollow Folk*, which called them "unlettered folk ... sheltered in tiny, mud-plastered log cabins, and supported by a primitive agriculture."

When Virginia offered buyouts, some people agreed. Eisenfeld quotes a displaced resident, who moved to one of the resettlement communities. "Do you think I'm going to hate having running water in my home, and a smooth yard with green grass, a store close by and the electric?" the woman asked.

But for all those who were willing to take the government's money

Stone stairs that once ascended to a home are all but invisible to those walking off trail.

and start over down the mountain, there were steadfast residents who wouldn't be moved at any price. Eisenfeld tells of strong arm tactics used against those who refused to go. In 1935, with only a handful of headstrong holdouts remaining, government officials burned down the home and all the possessions of Ambrose Shifflet when he and his family made a day trip to a relative's house.



Cleared pasture, cropland and orchards soon grew wild with emerging vegetation. The simple cabins succumbed to neglect and toppled over. The stacked stone walls that had once hemmed in livestock or divided neighbors' property stood silently as pine, poplar, oak and maple grew tall around them.

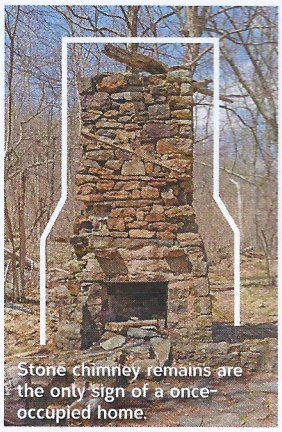
After finding a couple cemeteries and reflecting on the anonymous lives left there, we strike out over more rough ground for the remnants of a home. We see forlorn fence posts made from American chestnut, the tree all but wiped out by blight. We pass by several piles of native stone, put there by people who once cleared a field or readied for a construction project they never completed. "This is like a gold mine, waiting for something to be discerned," Eisenfeld tells me. "It's like another world in here."

We break for lunch at the stacked foundation of what was once a home. The foundation is now a rectangle of cold, gray stone covered with lichen and moss. There are perhaps scores of ruins like these within the park's boundaries.

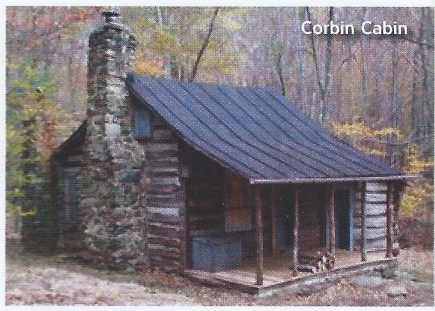
Thankfully, not all of these evocative reminders of the pre-Shenandoah National Park era require such a Herculean effort to find. Good thing, too, because tackling the park's terrain is not for the inexperienced. It is foolhardy to try and find these off-trail sites without years of practice under your belt. Unprepared hikers could face the prospect of an expensive and dangerous search-and-rescue operation or worse.

Besides, a few manageable hikes along well-maintained trails or fire roads (for emergency crews) give a sense for the lives mountain residents left behind. The Pocosin Mission Trail, for instance, leads to the remnants of a religious outpost built long ago by an evangelistic pastor who felt the calling of ministering to mountain residents. And the hike to the former home of George Corbin follows the Appalachian Trail before descending to Corbin Cabin, one of the few remaining intact, original log cabins left in the park.

This remaining stone foundation is easily overlooked if you aren't searching for it.



Stone chimney remains are the only sign of a once-occupied home.



Corbin Cabin

Says Eisenfeld: "The beauty of Shenandoah is that there's something for everyone. Most visitors simply drive Skyline Drive. A smaller percentage hike on the marked trails. And an even smaller percentage hike off-trail. No matter what brings people, there's something that speaks to them."

And whether Shenandoah National park's visitors drink in the breathtaking views along Skyline Drive, or stroll through the towering stands of trees, or find the forlorn cemeteries hiding beneath greenbrier, all those humbling experiences were made possible because residents were forced to leave their homes forever. As Eisenfeld writes, "The mountains call us here because of what was lost, what was taken, what is gone. The hollows and hills here in this jewel of America are rich, not just because of what is here, but because of what is no longer here." CoVa