

# All Souls Day in Shenandoah National Park

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SUE EISENFELD

“GONE,” Wayne Baldwin says of the large clapboard-sided, tin-roofed house that once stood in a hollow nestled among five mountains in what is now

*As the park turns 75, a couple who have enjoyed it for nearly 20 years step in among those whose roots run deep in this land – to before the park ever was.*

Shenandoah National Park. He has led my husband Neil and me down Hull School Trail and into thick brambles. We stand with a pile of large granite rocks at our feet, and an occasional brick, in a long rectangular gulley surrounded by a forest of towering trees.

“They knocked it down and burnt it up,” Wayne goes on, smoking a cigarette, wearing a fleece vest with the national park logo. “This is where my cousins Beulah and Mary grew up.”

The sky is achingly blue as we look up beyond the tallest tulip poplars, and the sun is filtering down to our feet through head-high bushes, casting camou-



flage shadows on our skin. Next to the house site is a bone-dry creek bed full of rounded rocks made red by soil, shards of pottery and a large glass jug, metal hardware that has grown thick with rust, and a piece of a horseshoe. Below the house site is a spring, covered with a still-standing concrete archway and spilling out into a small run where Neil picks up a red eft salamander from under a rock, and where, at a time when most mountain homes had no running water,



Beulah Bolen, now 92, once did laundry in a stream-fed, gas-powered washing machine, heating water for it over a fire. “It took me just as long to get the crank going as it did to do the wash,” she told us earlier in the day.

Her sister Mary Bolen Burner wanted to come down this steep trail too, to show us the old homeplace herself, but the last time she did it, “the way up reminded me I’m 88,” she laughed. (She’s now 90.)

What was once a massive eight-room house built in 1895 with two stone-and-brick chimneys, wallpaper, and carved fireplace mantelpieces in five rooms, surrounded by 30 acres of apple and peach orchards, and accompanied by eight outbuildings, including a barn, distillery, hog pen, corn house, meat house and wagon shed where the family sheared sheep, has now been completely integrated into the forest. There is hardly any sign of this previous life, and there’s

As far back as 1954, the Bolen family cemetery was among the most tended in the park; that care continues today.



return to their ancestors' back-country cemeteries. In the 1920s and 1930s, when the commonwealth of Virginia condemned the land of a few thousand landowners and paid them what was considered just compensation so it could donate a chunk of the Blue Ridge to the federal government for the nation's first large national park in the East, some of the despondent evacuees assumed that the cemeteries were off limits, and so they never returned.

The park policy regarding families' use, maintenance and access to the cemeteries has changed numerous times over the years. Combined with Congress's enactment of the Wilderness Act of 1964, which heavily restricted human activities in 42 percent of the park, including what some descendants consider the lands once most widely populated, many descendants have felt confused about family rights to the grave sites, which has led ultimately to neglect.

Nothing takes a burial ground down faster than nature's demolition services: Virginia's verdant briars and creeping vines, its fires, bears, gypsy moths and falling trees.

But Wayne and his predecessors have been maintaining this particular cemetery for more than half a century. As far back as 1954, the park's chief ranger noted that of all the known cemeteries within the north district, the Bolen Cemetery "receives the most attention."

Neil and I show up for the day not exactly sure what to expect. We know it will be a potluck lunch buffet, so we have brought a fancy peach pie from the best pie shop we know of in Northern Virginia. Can't go wrong with pie, we figure. I had never seen a pie that looked like this; rather than a criss-crossed lattice top, the pastry crust is cut into serrated rounds that overlap each other all the way across the pie, except for a small circle in the middle to see through to the glowing orange peaches.

I feel self-conscious about not being related to anyone here, nor anyone from the park, about being from the city – and a Yank. After initial awkward greetings, Wayne invites us into his SUV. We are a posse of about eight vehicles on a Do Not Enter park road. Rangers have unlocked the gate, due to

It really wasn't better. We were moved over [t]here, and we didn't have no fruit, and the water was hard. Over [here], we had a great big spring and we could collect it in a bucket to drink. We [once] had all kind of orchards and nuts. Beulah Bolen

Beulah Bolen and Mary Bolen Burner lived in Shenandoah before it was Shenandoah.

hardly anything any of us can say, standing around the haphazard rock pile. We do a collective head shake and then plow back through the brush to join the festivities up the hill.

WE ARE SPENDING the day with Wayne Baldwin and his extended family for the Bolen Cemetery Picnic and Cleanup Day, which he organizes twice each year. A tall, trim, jovial man in his 50s with a lean face and wire-framed glasses, he has spent the last 40 years researching his family history, tromping through the woods of this park, where both sides of the family once lived. He bushwhacks off-trail on old road traces with hand tools to keep up three other family cemeteries within the park.

Neil and I have been hiking off-trail for the last 18 years, finding remnants of families like his in the woods. We are meeting Wayne for the first time today.

Wayne Baldwin is no ordinary man. He is one of only a handful of park descendants that faithfully



Part of the old spring box remains on the former Bolen land.

Wayne's advance notice of the event and good relations with the park, but it feels illicit. Unlike most of our visits to this park, we're not here today to hike. We are not here to explore nature. We are here to honor everything that was lost to pave the way for our weekend-playground gain.

NEIL AND I FIRST SAW this cemetery back in 1992, within a year of moving to Virginia. I remember walking on a flat stretch under a dark canopy of trees that were leafed-out in a deep forest green, after a strenuous hike up Little Devils Stairs, when suddenly, a field of light-colored tombstones came into view. It was like a dream, when unlike objects or settings or people that don't belong together or know each other all of a sudden appear in the same scene as if totally normal.

I had never seen a cemetery in a backcountry forest.

I remember stopping to look at this unlikely relic. We hopped the stone wall and walked among granite, marble and field stones. With no other Shenandoah cemeteries to compare with back then, we didn't wonder why briars had not taken over the plot, why trees had not grown up inside. We didn't wonder who came miles into the woods on federal

#### **THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN: WILLIAM E. CARSON**

When William E. Carson took the job as the first chairman of the Commonwealth of Virginia's newly formed State Commission on Conservation and Development in 1926, he said he'd create Shenandoah National Park within the year.

The park opened 10 years later.

Plagued by fundraising problems, park acreage reductions, missing deeds and titles, boundary disputes, unwilling sellers, land-value arbitration, grassroots protests, legal challenges and the need to build resettlement communities for some of the displaced population, Carson lamented: "If the Park will give the people of Virginia half the enjoyment it gave us anxiety and tribulation it will be a mountain of content."

He was heroically dedicated to task. "There is no higher conception of duty than to feel we are of service to the State," he once said – the very echo of Robert E. Lee.

At a time when Virginia was still recovering from the War Between the States, Carson believed historic and natural conservation was Virginia's ticket to development and progress. Tourism, he said, should be the state's main industry.

Today, in addition to the 7.5 million people annually who visit the Virginia state-park system Carson created, Shenandoah – a place that was once called "the impossible park" – sees more than a million visitors a year, and 117.2 million people have journeyed here since its opening 75 years ago. For updates on Shenandoah's 75th anniversary commemorative events this year, visit [celebrateshenandoah.org](http://celebrateshenandoah.org). –SE

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land and mowed the lawn.

Today, we get the answers to what we never thought to ask.

When we arrive at the cemetery with Wayne, everyone bursts out of vehicles and begins assembling tables and lawn chairs and food. When I see other desserts showing up at one end of the spread, I set the peach pie out among them. Those who aren't working on fixing lunch are fanning out to place pots of fresh flowers at the grave sites of their relatives.

Wayne's mom places a bouquet at the grave of her grandmother and her "baby aunt and uncle," ages 6 months and 1 month. Mary and Beulah visit their grandparents, who purchased the family's thousand acres and built the Bolen house they grew up in. They pay tribute to their mother, who died at age 48, as well as their baby sister, age 3. Their father, who planted the 20 or so maples that now shade the cemetery – once in the middle of a cornfield – is buried somewhere else.

Beulah Bolen laments that her mother died when Beulah was just 12, leaving the family with seven children, and her in charge. Her childhood was full of work – planting and cutting down corn, gathering eggs, shearing sheep, milking cows, plucking geese for feather beds, making soap, cutting wood, and drying apples by spreading them on roofs in the sun.

She recalls the carbide gas lamps that lit her childhood home, an unusual fixture for a mountain house of that time. Her father would buy large hunks of calcium carbide from the store, which were placed in a five-foot hole near the house. The hole contained a tank that kept a gas, produced from the reaction of carbide and water, sealed and under pressure. She remembers pipes emerging from the hole, carrying the gas to fixtures in every room.

Now, outside the wrought-iron gate, when the tablecloths, utensils, and coolers are ready, and the food is unwrapped, we are all called over to eat. One of the family patriarchs asks everyone to take hands and count off how many have joined here today (24) and to say grace. Then everyone digs in: mac and cheese, pasta salad, cucumber salad, baked beans with sausage, green beans, cole



Wayne Baldwin: His relatives' massive eight-room home and its eight outbuildings were destroyed when the park came along.

slaw, fried chicken, potato chips and pimento cheese sandwiches. I had been worried I might not be able to find much to eat because I am a vegetarian, but my plate is full of delectable country cooking.

It's not too long before people start eating dessert. In no time at all, big hunks are cut out of the coconut cream pie, a hole is dug into banana pudding, brownies disappear, blood-red Jello is jiggling on flimsy white plates, and chocolate cake begins to vanish.

But nobody touches my pie.

THOUGH I AM anti-development and a conservationist, an avid lover of the national parks, and grateful for the drive and passion of the visionaries

and planners who made this park happen despite all odds, the history of the land condemnation here and the people's severed bonds with their ancestral homes has always seemed devastating to me.

Some people who unwillingly left refused to ever partake of the park. Some descendants say they feel horrible when they are there. Others, though, enjoyed the payment from the government and the ability to find more fertile land and a better life somewhere else.

Beulah is the first still-living former resident I've ever met. When I ask how she felt, at age 15, upon hearing the family would have to move away from their home, from the rolling fields and wide sky that can hardly be pictured now under the shadow of the forest canopy, whether her family was content with leaving, she shrieks: "No, indeedy! We cried like babies!"

"It really wasn't better," she explains calmly. "We were moved over [t]here, and we didn't have no fruit, and the water was hard. Over [here], we had a great big spring and we could collect it in a bucket to drink. We [once] had all kind of orchards and nuts." But, when asked if the memories of what happened to her have made the park too painful to enjoy during the long years of her life, she says with her slow southern drawl, stoically, befitting of someone with the wisdom of time and age, "Well, you get over that."

I eventually notice that each dessert-maker has cut slices in advance to get people started, and so finally – in my tormented, self-conscious state – I walk over to my beautiful untouched pie, grab a knife from another dessert, and make some slices ready to

### PARK VOLUNTEERS MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

More than a million visitors come to the Shenandoah National Park every year to take in the views, hike the trails, perhaps buy a book on wildflowers. These activities would be far less enjoyable – maybe even nonexistent – were it not for the vision and commitment of three non-profit organizations.

Shenandoah National Park Trust, Shenandoah National Park Association, and the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club support the park in different ways, and together, like a three-legged stool, form a solid foundation for this crown jewel of America's natural heritage.

As the park's budget shrinks, its staff dwindles, and its needs grow greater, the park partners are more important than ever.

Shenandoah National Park Trust is the leg that provides direct support, and has contributed more than \$500,000 to the park in goods and services since

forming in 2004. The restoration of the wildly popular Old Rag Mountain overlook? The trust. The hand-held GPS devices for self-guided tours? The trust.

"So many people have incredibly strong ties to the park, because they've had a fantastic experience in Shenandoah or they've been coming here since they were kids," says executive director Susan Sherman.

"Supporting their park through Shenandoah National Park Trust gives them a way to give back."

The trust works closely with park staff to identify priorities, then seeks funding from foundations, corporations and individuals. A new source of funding is the Shenandoah National Park license plate, which has brought in about \$30,000 in just two years.

Another leg is Shenandoah National Park Association,



Susan Sherman

eat. Cousins hovering near the food table begin congregating around me as I work.

No one's engaging with me. I am sure they don't remember my name. But soon a woman named Robin inches toward me from behind and leans in close. "Everyone is talking about that pie," she whispers in my ear. "No one makes that kind of pie anymore."

Still slicing, I feel a smile creep over my face in quiet relief. "My grandmother used to make a pie like that," she says, referring to the overlapping pastry-rounds design. "But no one since."

I set down the knife and step away from the table, only to have the space I inhabited filled instantly with eager pie-eaters. I had hit the jackpot. Robin and several other people take huge wedges of it.

AT CLEANUP TIME, there is still about a third of the pie left. I would love to have more of it, but I approach Robin, who has warmed my day with thoughts of her grandmother's lost tradition. "Do you want the rest of this?" I ask. Her eyes widen. "I'd love it," she says.

At the end of the picnic, we are all hugs. Mary and Beulah and Robin bid us a fond farewell, and Wayne and his mom gush about how nice it was for us to come. I don't have words to convey how grateful I am that they took us in to the folds of their fam-



There are still pieces of work and life at the old Bolen home site.

ily – the joyous day as well as the painful past. For the nearly two decades we have been hiking, backpacking and bushwhacking the hills and the hollows of this magnificent place, feeling like interlopers, we have never gotten this close to the real mountain residents, the flesh and blood of history.

They have put faces to the stone foundations and rock walls we will continue to find. They have put names to the unmarked graves to which our future hikes in this park will no doubt lead. They have let us know, with their acceptance: It is alright that you are here. ✖

*Sue Eisenfeld (earthwords@earthlink.net) is a writer in Arlington, Va., working on a hiking memoir about Shenandoah National Park. This article is an excerpt.*

which sells maps, books, calendars, prints and other items in the park's gift shops and gives the proceeds to the park. Begun in 1950, the group has contributed more than \$2 million.

The third and oldest leg is the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club – the folks who keep the trails in good hiking order by removing blow-downs, weeding, building water bars, and so forth. The club maintains 101 miles of the AT, plus another 350 miles, roughly 65 percent of all trail miles in the park. Last year, that amounted to 25,000 volunteer hours, says president John Hedrick. "It takes a fair amount of effort. We take pride in doing that."

Says park superintendent Martha Bogle: "Our partners are becoming even more important in ensuring a successful future for Shenandoah National Park. National Park Service employees alone cannot protect this special place. We need our partners, communities and stakeholders to take an active role alongside us."

To get involved, donate, and be part of the Shenandoah National Park family of volunteers:



Park volunteers help build and restore Shenandoah.

Shenandoah National Park Trust: [snptrust.org/](http://snptrust.org/)

Shenandoah National Park Association: [snpbooks.org/](http://snpbooks.org/)

Potomac Appalachian Trail Club: [patc.net](http://patc.net)

– Cathryn McCue