



by Sue Eisenfeld • photography by Laurie McClellan

Life & Death

near Butterwood Branch

WHY WOULD A TRIO OF HIKERS BUSHWHACK INTO A WINTER FOREST, ALONG TRAILS THAT NO LONGER EXIST, SEEKING TRACES OF LIFE LONG FORGOTTEN?

IT'S NOVEMBER, and the air is white and icy. Here, in Virginia's Shenandoah National Park, there are no fiery leaves, blooming mountain laurels, or delicate pink wild azaleas. For most people, this is the off-season. The forest is brown and brittle. And yet for my husband Neil, our friend Jeremy, and me, out here in the dead, empty places on the map, the mountains are very much alive.

Our first target is the Clark cemetery on the former property of Andrew J. Clark, who once owned 288 acres, a house, a barn, and 75 fruit trees before this park became a park. We take the old Turn Bridge Trail to where it intersects with an abandoned trail. A book on the history of this park is our "guide" for the day. It says we'll find the cemetery in the northwest quadrant of this junction, near the ruins of a house with three chimneys. Fifteen or 20 people were buried here. At the four-way intersection, our quadrant is full of greenbrier, like a tangle of barbed wire.

The three of us skirt around the edges, walking

amidst the telltale graveyard myrtle, its four-leaf green bundles standing out in contrast against the fallen orange leaves. Jeremy spots the first of the three or so unmarked fieldstones inside the nest of thorns – nothing engraved, nothing carved. An errant brick has found its way among them. This small collection of rock is all that remains of the homestead.

From there, we set our sights on the Menefee cemetery on a piece of Ben Menefee's 175-acre estate, circa 1929. We are directed to continue 0.3 miles on the Pass Mountain Trail to find an old road trace – which appears on no map – and veer west: cryptic, as bushwhacking notes always are.

It's easy to say we simply walked onward and found the old road trace with no problem, at the site of a large tulip poplar, after passing a stone spring box along the way, but this feat is only accomplished due to our three sets of well-trained eyes and the intuition we've built up over a combined 60 years of bushwhacking the wilderness. We take off into the forest,

Top: A fieldstone headstone with graveyard myrtle is in an unmarked cemetery. **Far left:** Sue Eisenfeld and husband Neil walk near Butterwood Branch. **Left:** A piece of a wood stove remains from when the land was not a park.

just as we are told, to begin the true off-trail bushwhack part of our day. The book tells us to follow the path northwest for a mile.

The trace is so faint that we lose it after awhile, and it's just us three in the middle of the woods with no human or natural, literal or figurative signposts. I stop for a few minutes, surveying the scene. Jeremy does the same, while Neil continues wandering.

Jeremy and I stand there for a minute, two minutes, eyeing the slope of the hill, the direction we are headed, the contour line from whence we came, to try to envision or sense where we should be going. We think we see it in one place, make our way there, decide we're wrong, and stand in silence again, scanning the scene slowly and methodically, waiting for our eyes to adjust, like getting your night vision after turning off the lights.

It is in this osmotic, ESP-like state that we find it, Jeremy and I both, at practically the same moment: a more barely-there trace than any of the other barely-there traces I've seen in this park, finally popping out from the surrounding landscape like those optical-illusion "stereograms" or "magic eye" puzzles. We hop on the path

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again, shuffling our feet through the leaves while winding our way around the curve of a mountain, passing rock walls and stone piles, some of which Neil thinks look "foundation-y," like they might once have been stacked to support a long-gone log home.

We're so smug at having found this old road that we're stung with disappointment when we end up in a gully full of dozens of large downed trees, obliterating the way forward. Neil climbs up the hill looking for a way out, Jeremy works his way down, and I am stuck somewhere in the middle in a labyrinth of impassible branches.

Neil makes the most convincing argument about which way the road goes, and so we follow him, out of the gully and into apple orchard flats, through tunnels of laurels, past more rock structures from when these mountain lands were farms. We feel far away from places we know in this park, from the trails we've hiked and the areas we've explored before; removed from the communities we've envisioned here, the neighborhoods of homes.

We find ourselves standing where the cemetery ought to be, lost.

"There's graveyard myrtle all around us," I notice.

"The land is extremely level," Neil observes.

"There are other rock walls in the vicinity," Jeremy mentions.

After about five minutes of announcing the workings of our intuitive data-collection machines, we realize we are standing in the cemetery itself, amidst several old, gray chestnut fence posts and their corollary wire fence, which have blended in with the trees in the distance.

And then there it is – what the history book promised: the ornately scripted headstone of Catherine Menefee, "Wife of B.F.

Menefee, Died September 12, 1900, Blessed be the dead who die in the Lord."

The book says there are 25 to 30 burials here, but we only see a few sunken spots and a handful of native fieldstone markers rising out of the forest duff.

Neil declares this the nicest house site of the dozens we've seen because it's flat and open and so far from the rest of the world. We all take a seat on a log for a snack and survey the Menefees' land, imagining their quiet lives way back here, far from the main road.

While we sit, pondering the days when the simple things you had – family, the land – were enough, we suddenly become aware of a noise, which Neil thinks at first is the sound of children crying, Jeremy believes is a pack of dogs, and I most definitely know is a wild animal.

Across this flat and over to our left toward a peak, we hear them: coyotes. All the time that we stood here surveying the land, debating where the treasure was hidden, they were silent. Then suddenly, in wild cacophony, they awake. A warning? We sit awhile and take it in, that here in the East, in a national park that's only a few miles wide at its widest point, and only 100 miles long, a size that nowhere even closely rivals its western counterparts, just a two-hour drive from the nation's capital, we hikers can sit with a complete absence of modern-life noise and enjoy the whiney cries of coyotes. It is one of the moments park creators must have envisioned during their many years of fighting to conserve these mountains.

**NEXT ON THE AGENDA** is the Bruce cemetery. We retrace our steps back through the yellow birch, red oak, red maple, black cherry, and an unusually large black gum tree, to the abandoned Butterwood Trail, a decommissioned old road. Then we set out to follow the directions to somewhere on Oventop Mountain; from Butterwood, we are to "Take an old fork northeastward. Three native stones in middle of path."

Butterwood Trail is a major thoroughfare, though it has vanished from all modern-day maps. The rut that this old road has created is as high as my chest, and it is wide and easy to follow. But the information about this cemetery doesn't indicate how far we should go; is the old fork just a few feet away, a few hundred feet, a few miles?

It's 3 in the afternoon. We've been at this since our arrival around 10. Given that it's winter, we have limited sunlight. Even though this has not been a death-march type of bushwhack – though there have been a few limbos under trees, a few branches snapping back into faces, a few interactions where skin met thorn – I am starting to feel I am reaching the end of my patience and stamina.

We walk about half a mile before we see what we could construe as an "old fork" off the side of the road. It's a still-passable old side road, faint but noticeable to us. Again, we don't know the distance to the treasure. A few minutes on this fork turns into maybe 30 minutes, and it seems we are walking endlessly as the road undulates up and down. Ever the doubter, I keep remarking that there's no way we're going to find it, that the author of this guide wouldn't have led us down some middle-of-nowhere road for this length of time, with no other landmark notes and no other clues.

After another mile, or an hour, the "road" – really nothing more than a nearly-make-believe indent in the ground through woods that we imbue with historical meaning – ends. We do not see a way forward, and nothing welcomes us to the destination.

Jeremy begins his sniffing and sensing in one direction, Neil in another, and I wait for some kind of sign that we've followed the right path, from God or someone. Within a minute, Jeremy delivers. He points to the three native stones directly in the middle of the path, camouflaged by the woods, weather-beaten by time.

The stones are tall and rectangular like proper carved obelisks, three-sided with perfectly formed corners as if chiseled into shape, seemingly too perfect to have come from nature. No names are engraved, as in so many of these overgrown and out-of-sight family plots, where the folks who buried their loved ones in the backyard or in the corn field or next to the church knew who was interred and assumed each generation would pass the knowledge forward so that the whereabouts of the family dead, like the family bible, would never be lost.

In the 1800s, or in 1900, or anytime through the 1920s and 30s when these lands held homes, no one could have ever imagined that their family burial grounds, their homes and farms and gardens and mills, would be sold into the hands of strangers, people who didn't know the family stories or the names, and never would, and for generations to come could do nothing but stand by and watch these sacred places be overtaken by the wild, no matter how much they revered them.

That, the three of us know, is exactly why we are here. ❧

*Sue Eisenfeld is a writer in Arlington, Va. Her first book, a hiking journey through the history of the lost communities of Shenandoah National Park (and which includes a version of this essay), will be published by the University of Nebraska Press in fall, 2014.*



This chestnut fence post  
pre-dates Shenandoah  
National Park.