

Appalachian betrayals and Shenandoah lies

BY MIKE WOLD
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What, exactly, is wilderness? In "Shenandoah: A Story of Conservation and Betrayal," Sue Eisenfeld tells how she came to terms with the fact that her favorite wilderness national park, Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, was no wilderness at all when it was created in the 1930s. In fact, some 16,000 people were displaced by the creation of the park,

many of them descendants of people who had settled there hundreds of years before.

It's not an unfamiliar story, though usually the displaced people in our history were indigenous rather than white. But the story of Shenandoah stands out because the drive to create the park, starting in the 1920s, was fueled as much by the nascent automobile tourism industry as by

conservationists who wanted to protect the southern Appalachian forests from logging. The first ridge of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which became the park, was a short drive from Washington, D.C.

Business owners in the area, including a rich resort owner, were clamoring for the creation of a park that could funnel money into hotels, resorts, campgrounds, restaurants and stores. True to its roots, one of the first pieces of infrastructure in the park was the Blue Ridge Parkway, a beautiful ridge-top drive that is the most visited part of the park.

The Shenandoah Mountains had been a productive farming and grazing area since before the American Revolution. It was in economic decline in the early 1900s. One principal product was the American chestnut, which constituted a quarter of the trees in the Eastern forest. It had been all but wiped out by an imported fungus. Prohibition reduced the market for apple cider from the extensive orchards in the area. But, as the U.S. Department of Agriculture noted at the time, the area was still a major beef producer for the East Coast. There were also hundreds of farms where people lived from subsistence and cash-crop farming.

As has so often happened in land grabs, the boosters painted the park as virtually uninhabited. Then it became obvious that



people lived there and that their land had value. The propaganda started: "Hidden communities of backward, illiterate people living in medieval squalor... illustrat[e] the effect of... degenerative cross-breeding... [T]he ragged children... had never seen the flag or heard of 'The Lord's Prayer.'" Who could question that such lives would be improved by forcing them into modern civilization?

The plan was to create a wilderness to allow all the evidence that people had lived there to rot and weather away. Only in the 1960s, with a revived historic preservation movement, did the government start to recognize that the structures in the park were a part of Virginia's and the country's history.

Eisenfeld was a novice hiker when she first visited the park. As she developed her skills and stamina, it became her hobby to seek out the old structures and cemeteries and the histories of the families who had lived there. She sought out old cemeteries and discovered that there are families that still visit the park every year to see where their ancestors are buried. It became a conflict for her, as she realized that the park she loved had been created through heartbreak and displacement.

As a piece of personal journalism, this slim volume works well enough, and it's an important story to tell. Eisenfeld acknowledges that she hasn't dealt with some of the big questions about Shenandoah Park. Threads of the story that would make for fascinating reading include the decline of the American chestnut, a

native species that is barely surviving; the history of the hills and the people who lived in them; the native peoples and African-Americans who are not referred to but also must have lived there; and the history of racism in the park — when it opened, it was with segregated and mostly white-only facilities. And, finally, despite Eisenfeld's love of the historical remnants in the park, she doesn't really talk about historic preservation and how the stories of the people in the park, and what they left behind, could be preserved.

But the biggest question is, can and should wilderness be created in this way? Western national parks were arguably mostly wilderness when they were formed, although there was still significant use and settlement by Native Americans. Creating national parks on the East Coast meant moving significant numbers of people who were living there. The American ideal of wilderness, of a land empty of and untouched by people, ignores indigenous use, as well as the people who mined, settled, farmed and hunted in these lands. Our insistence on creating uninhabited places reflects our own ambivalence about nature and civilization. Rather than seeking a way of living with nature, we prefer to pretend we can live away from nature (so to speak) and visit it on weekends, adding to the carbon load as we do so. Other countries, such as Canada and the U.K., have national parks where people still live. Shenandoah could have been such a park.

Vision, reflected in sun

By Rachel D

Vision, reflected in sun
hazel-green glistening back
hiding darkness, swirling.
Bronzed black plum, like a crow,
set atop dark austere,
rich with potential.
The sun looks good on you,
yet you hate it.

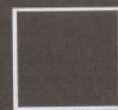
paint of my soul

By Chance S.

my weight has been recorded
for the gallows trap door
They want me
deemed a lunatic
for what I have embraced
for answers I have sought
They see me as dangerous
dreams are now governed by reason
spirits no longer visit
deconstruction of a singular architecture
dragged away from the carnival in the fog
They have thrown me in a cell
with a sink full of razorblades
They have me
memories offer no reprieve
nor the glimmering ray of light that
whispers
"freedom"
beyond rust of barred windows
the thin line of my lips
shows no emotion
pale canvas of my skin loosens
around shrunken corpulence
as the paint of my soul
peels away.
They have won.



Dignity



Poverty