

In The Mountains Again, 2004

The little red Cavalier, loaded down with suitcases, a cooler full of iced-down soda, and a bagful of snacks, carries us westward toward Roanoke at the start of our latest adventure. The first promise of daylight hints at a rain-washed world. Advertising signs light up the barely-dawn roadsides and actually are pretty.

We eat breakfast at Hardee's and allow daylight to catch up to us, then head south on Interstate 81. Wisps of fog accent the mountains as we notice all the traffic so early this morning. Where are they all going? Thirty nine states and two Canadian provinces are represented by vehicles along our way. We notice that there is more color here than back in Lynchburg. Is the altitude that much higher? Deer, munching their breakfast, pay no attention to the traffic beside them.

At last the sun peeks through the clouds and highlights the glowing trees and emerald hillsides dotted with cattle and horses. I firmly believe that cattle in Virginia and West Virginia are required to complete "Mountain Grazing School" before they are turned loose in the pastures. This is where they are fitted with mechanical apparatus which enables them to extend two legs in order to keep their balance on the steep hills.

Soon we are near Wytheville, Virginia, and spot a hillside of horses. Hmm...I wonder.... Do they accept horses at that school?

Interstate 77 takes us northward thru some gorgeous country and also Big Walker Mountain Tunnel.



This thing is almost a mile long and I am on the lookout for the paparazzi chasing Diana thru here. Oh, oh! The mind is working overtime today.

Farms with Harvestores are tucked among the mountains. Wildflower patches line the roadside. Glorious colored trees spice up the green valleys. Truck escape ramps remind us that these sensational mountain roads can be deadly if common sense is lacking. We pass Bastain, Virginia, and notice the contrast of a white country church sitting alongside a brightly lit modern Exxon station.

Soon we stop at a rest area that is snuggled in a green basin, surrounded by a curtain of rust and gold. Petunias, mums, marigolds, and bright red salvia are glowing around the natural rock building.

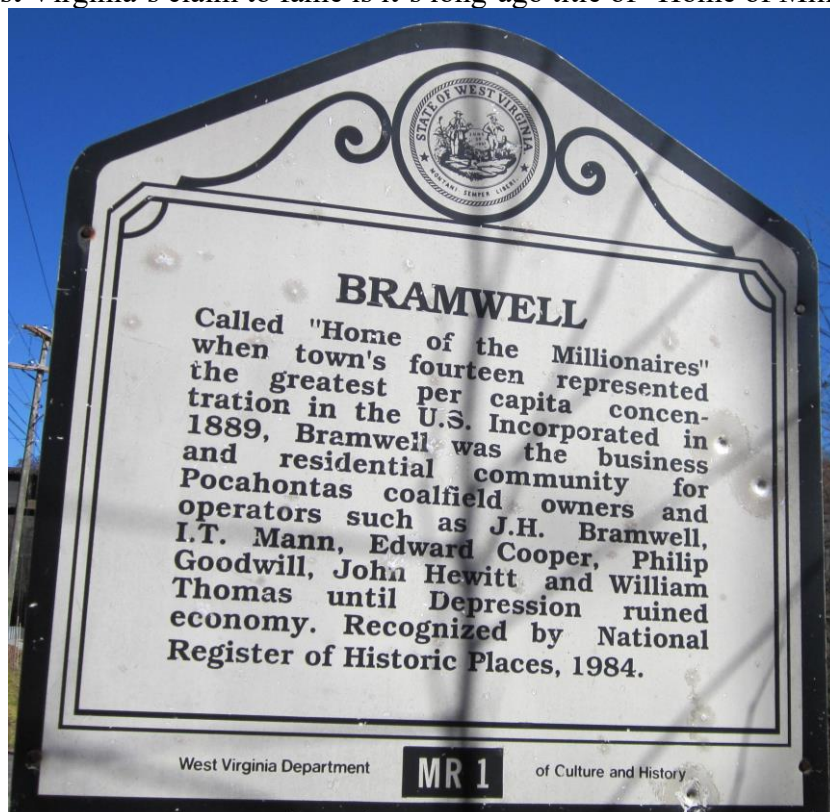
East River Mountain Tunnel, another nearly mile-long marvel of technology, takes us to the West Virginia state



line.

We meander around the area, and then take County Road Seven toward Ada, West Virginia. This road picks its way through the passes and we are in yet another tunnel -- this one is a tunnel of gold leaves overhead and beside us. I am reminded of a song from my high school chorus days that is entitled "Green Cathedral". In this case it is a gold cathedral. "I know a gold cathedral, a shadowed forest shrine, where leaves in love join hands above, and arch your prayer and mine."

After a couple of sandwiches from Hardee's in Bluefield, we head west again through coal mining company towns. Bramwell, West Virginia's claim to fame is it's long-ago title of "Home of Millionaires".



The town was incorporated in 1889 and was home to fourteen millionaires (coal mine owners), giving the little town the greatest per capita concentration of millionaires in the United States. Then the depression ruined the economy and left the town with many beautiful mansions but no cash. Many of these historic homes have been restored to their former grandeur and tours are offered.



A replica of the old Norfolk and Western railway station has been built to house a museum, filled with loads of donated and loaned displays of local history.



Their coal heritage runs through the townfolks' veins. They have much to be proud of!

We tour other towns, sheltered by towering auburn peaks.

Many of the houses need paint -- and some need roofs, too --, reflecting the depressed economy of today's coal

business.



Coal once was king here and the area is a shadow of its former glory days, but you can tell that families still thrive here and love abounds. Often these houses are surrounded by pretty flowers and proudly guard children's toys in their front lawns. Oh, and don't forget the nice pickup truck or SUV parked by the street.

Keystone, West Virginia, is an interesting little village. There is a coal processing plant in the middle of town and the whole place is covered with coal dust.



After a rain shower, we spot men with shovels scraping the goey black substance from the sidewalks. How in

the world do they keep their homes clean? Gravel trucks are hauling loads from local mines down the road in every direction.

Another coal town, Kimball, has the usual selection of homes, some deteriorating, some spic and span, but the centerpiece of the community is a well-kept elementary school.

We stop in Northfork and Jim recalls when there was a block of buildings across the tracks.



What is there now is a great little playground park for the younger generation. One business in town is the Black Diamond Pharmacy. Such a fitting name!

Truckloads of logs meet us, coming out of the hills with another type of natural treasure, brown diamonds. Blue chicory and white daisies decorate the roadsides as we find Coopers, West Virginia, and admire the huge black railroad bridge ahead of us.





We cross a wobbly bridge to get a closer look. Jim is on deck with his camera. The massive railroad bridge makes a fantastic frame for the splendor of the mountainsides covered with awesome trees of gold.



Here is yet another view of the bridge. Don't you just love all the angles and shadows?



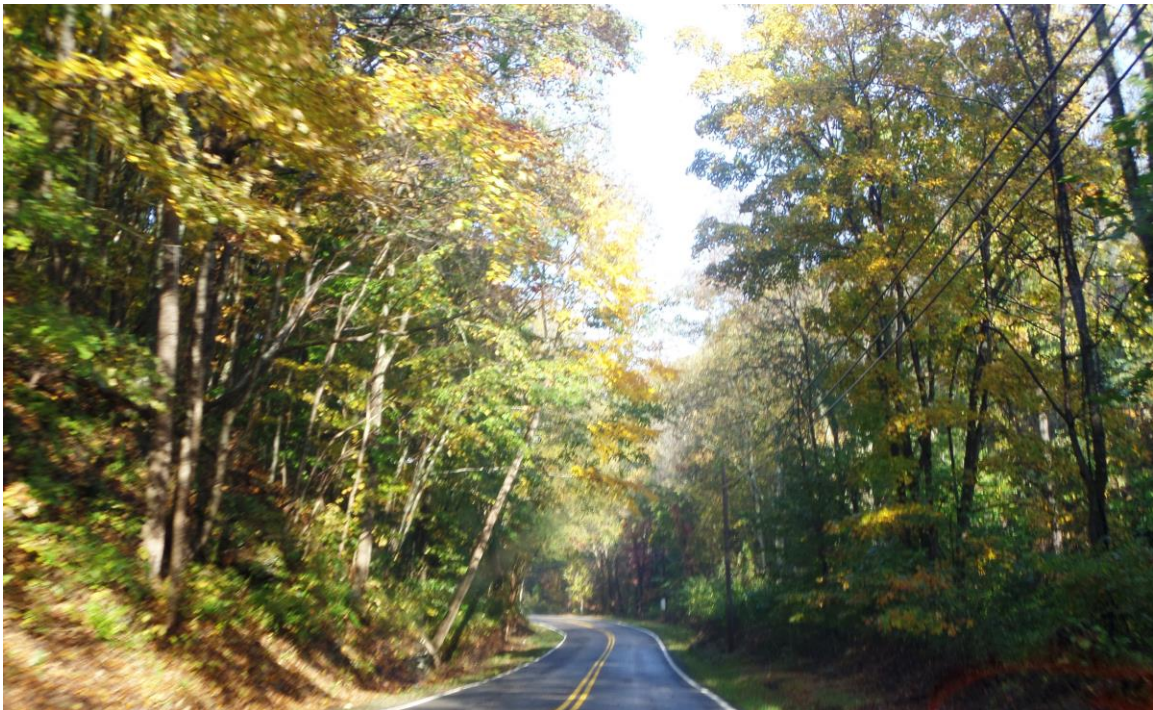
We return to Bluefield, check into the motel, then enjoy supper at the local KFC. Yum! After supper we tour the town and find some interesting back streets which give us a birds' eye view of the busy train yards and the coal tower.



It is Friday morning and we are ready for another great day. The “long-cut” (most definitely not the shortcut here) from Welch, West Virginia to Davy proves to be worth the extra miles. Lavender asters and the last morning glories of the season strut their stuff along our way as we drive through leaf storms of gold and brown.



The road curves about every hundred feet and we wait in expectation at each rise in the road to see what new vistas will be ahead of us.



Seams of glistening coal accent the cliffs beside us and brilliant red sumac dazzles in the morning sun. The little

village of Davy consists of the usual small stores, a post office, the railroad track running the full length of the center of town, and dozens of houses clinging to mountainsides.



An American flag proudly flutters above the fire department. The love of country is the same no matter where you are from the smallest village to the largest city. Black eyed Susans sneak between cracks in a retaining wall. Davy is an oasis of filtered sunlight protected by gold and maroon covered massifs soaring in every direction.

Again we are on the move and notice gray clouds filling the sky, hiding the mid-morning sun and muting the color show. Our road leads us into a tunnel which is hacked through a mountain. Roofs of houses are often road-level and Jim remarks that Santa certainly should have no problem getting to those chimneys. One driveway is lined with a retaining wall fashioned from old truck tires -- hey, it served the purpose! We see many abandoned and "oughta-be-abandoned" mobile homes



and houses alongside fresh new doublewides. One doublewide is truly that --- two singles parked side by side and used as one unit. Water gushes out of rocks beside us. We share the roads (even the highways) with all terrain vehicles -- and BOY! Are those guys muddy!

Roderfield Tunnel is a pleasant spot to sit alongside and view trains and just soak up the scenery. Downtown Iager, West Virginia, is a bustling little village and, of course, Jim finds the coaling tower there and reminisces about the days long ago when steam trains were the norm.



Peach Creek affords us a look at the rail yard where lines radiate to various local coal mines. In Gilbert we hit another Hardee's and watch the ATV traffic through the intersections of two highways. This week there is a special gathering of riders for the Hatfield and McCoy celebration. The Gilbert Coal Company is very much in business.



Just north of Logan we take a tour of the Chief Logan State Park and find a C & O Kanawha locomotive on display. A ranger unlocks the gate to the fenced in area and we eagerly climb up into the cab.





Also in the park is a wonderful museum of local history and a large model railroad layout. A curator gives me some pieces of coal and I'm a happy camper. I've been badgering Jim to stop for a coal souvenir. People are busy setting up the annual Christmas Drive-Through display which extends the length of the park so we drive the mile long park road to check their progress. Near the swimming pool are several deer who "pay us no mind" and do not even raise their heads when we park a short distance from them.

Alas, it is getting late and it is time to leave this pretty park so we head for our Super 8 Motel in Logan, West Virginia. We walk across the parking lot through a cold rain to the Schoneys' next door and enjoy chopped steak and baked spuds. Very Tasty! The parking lot is filled with trailers of ATV's and we chat with several guys from Ohio and North Carolina.

Saturday morning dawns to a steady rain but the scenery is awesome anyway. Mountains sport plumes of vapor lifting to the Heavens. The river is army green today. Because we are deep in mountain country, there are very few TV antennas on the roofs but an ample supply of satellite dishes. Route 10 travels for miles on a zig-zag path carved out of the side of mountains and we look straight down to the river. Ya gotta love those guard rails! Some of the sharper curves have convex mirrors on poles to help minimize the chance of accidents. Many people live in single and doublewide mobile homes but the best one yet is the stacked single. Yup, two singlewides stacked! Ah, that American ingenuity! We wonder what fuels the economy along here. Most homes are well kept with lots of kids' toys around.

Just north of Oceana, West Virginia, we see bands of coal in the rocks beside the road and Jim pulls over so I can get a couple of hunks. This coal is more glittery than the coal pieces the curator at the park gave me. Yellow, red, and gold trees cling above jet black coal walls above and ahead of us. Vivid crimson sumac has just a toehold among layers of rocks and a shaft of sunlight highlights a colony of lichen.

The next stop is Thurmond, West Virginia. We drive about five miles past the end of civilization and pass under God's version of "The Golden Arches",



then the gorgeous refurbished station comes into view.

Mist turns into icy drizzle about the time the twenty one car excursion train arrives from Huntington with one thousand people on board. Not all of them get off the train in Thurmond but there sure is a mess of folks spreading like a mushroom cloud over the area.



We chat with a couple from the eastern shores of Maryland and enjoy the enthusiasm of the young man in a bright red sweat shirt. Many of the passengers are part of tour groups from all over the country and most wear badges of their group.

John Hopkins of New Jersey is on hand with his camera. An hour later the throng is still milling around the buildings when we hear the ear-piercing whistle of the locomotive and the troops scramble back on their cars.

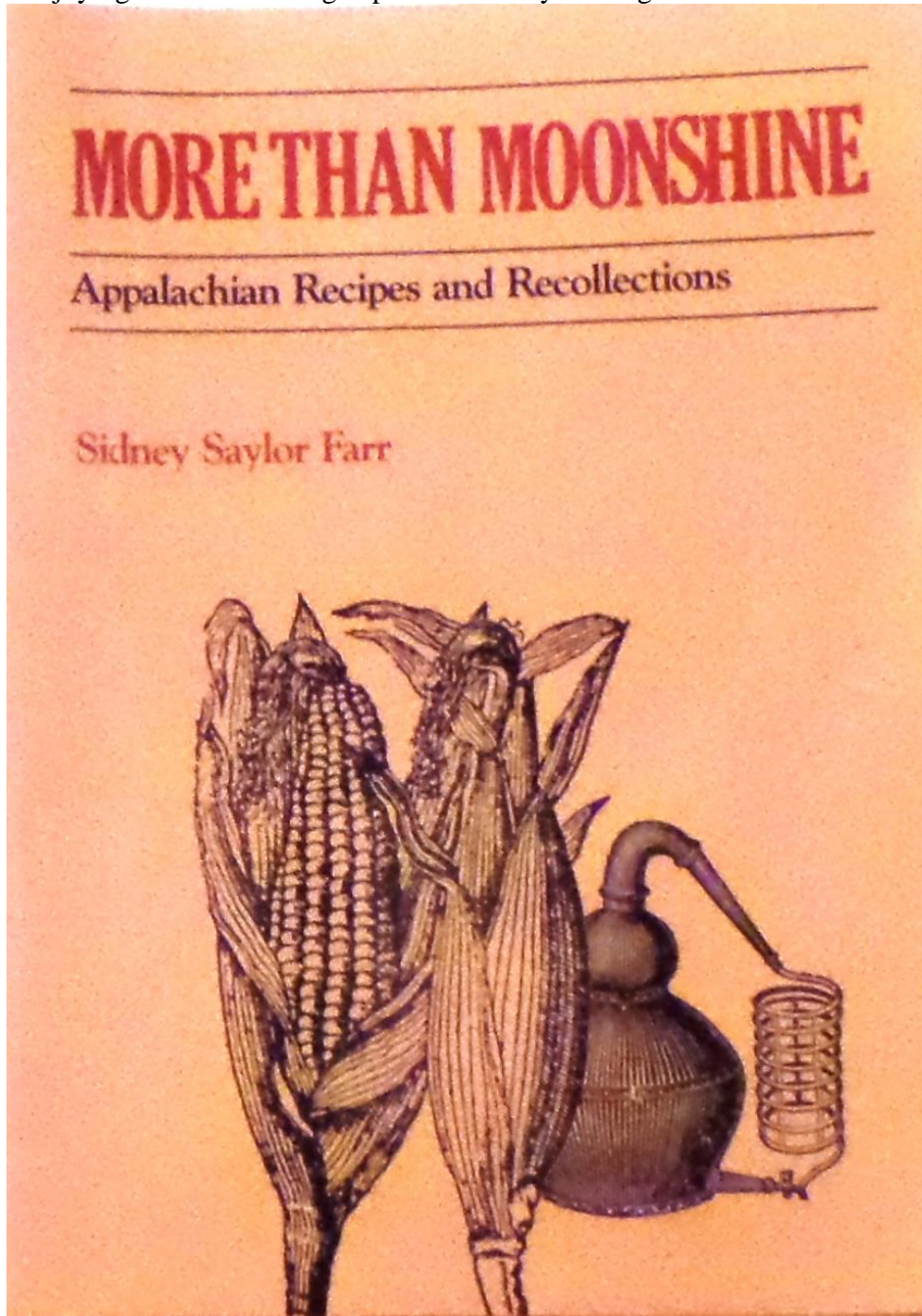


Things are delayed a bit as they wait for an ambulance to come for a lady who is having heart problems.

Then they are gone and quiet returns to the station. If you listen very closely in the wind, you can still hear the voices of the coal miners and their families so long ago when this was the epicenter of coaling along the New River Gorge. At one time Thurmond generated more traffic for the railroad than Richmond or Cincinnati. Now

the town has just a few abandoned buildings (The 2000 census listed seven residents.) and, of course, the excellent station which still is an official Amtrak stop. If you are interested in more information on this place of history, go to the website: <http://www.nps.gov/neri/thurmond.htm>. The friendly Park Rangers are busily putting their station back in order after the excursion invasion, but take time to chat with us. I buy a cookbook (So, what else is new?) which was written by a gal who grew up in the mountains of West Virginia during the forties. In it are recipes for birch tree sap beer, baked possum, and full instruction for making your own moonshine.

Jim will soon be enjoying some fine dining experiences in Lynchburg!



The Park Service radio comes to life and warns of a coming storm with hail and sleet so we reluctantly cross the bridge over the wild rushing New River and head for the main highway.



A plush rug of leaves is pasted over the blacktop road and, in places, you cannot see the center line.

Near Beckley a patch of sun escapes the clouds and accents the lavender wild flowers in the center median. The hills are alive with color now and a rainbow drapes over a distant peak.

We park for a short time in East Meadow Creek and absorb the peace of this place. Carloads of coal sparkle in the sunlight. The Sandstone Visitors' Center is interesting but, just as we leave there, the excursion train passes and we miss the photo opportunity.

Between Hinton and Ronceverte, we drive by the road that leads to Alderson, West Virginia, and we wonder how Martha Stewart is doing today. To the north of Route 64 a long valley extends just short of forever between two mountain ridges. It is filled with farms and bright green pastures. Every hillside pasture contains cattle. Along the fences are long white rolls of plastic-covered hay bales. We suddenly realize we didn't see very many cattle in the extreme terrain and decide that it is because the government has not yet offered advanced classes in "Mountain Grazing School". Here they would learn the skills needed to *retract* two legs at the same they mechanically extend the other two.

Western Sizzler Restaurant in Covington, Virginia, has my favorite baked sweet potatoes but Jim wants no part of that and chooses the normal white spuds with his meal. I notice a fellow diner with a bright red Wisconsin Badgers sweat shirt and learn she is from Broadhead, Wisconsin. We have a pleasant conversation, then head for the local Best Western for the night.

We awake Sunday morning to clear skies and 32 degrees. Brr! Soon the sun is creeping over the mountains and warms the rugged rock cut as we park at beautiful Moss Run.



Sharp winds howl around our car, making us appreciate our warm comfortable cocoon. White-winged birds dart overhead, doing their morning chores and whatever birds do best. These rocks look like massive pieces of petrified wood, accented by spruce and stunted balsams.





We sit trackside and enjoy the tranquility and God-organized-wonder of our world. This remote spot feels to be a zillion miles from home, but, in reality, Lynchburg is only about a hundred miles away. We have passed this place four times on Amtrak and numerous times by car but never tire of its beauty. Basking in the morning sun, we happily reminisce about our diverse life experiences before we met. I am **SO BLESSED!** Dainty, wispy purple flowers wink at us from among the red seed pods of cacti along the parking area.



A trainload of coal heads eastward and Jim, pulling on a heavier jacket, scrambles up the rocks to get a great photo. Finally it is time to mentally box up our visual memories and head back to our good life in Lynchburg.

We find a fall festival in Clifton Forge, Virginia, and roam the streets, taking in all the sights and smells of popcorn and the other usual goodies found at small town affairs. A local service organization is selling lunches so we get in line. The steak and onion sandwiches are pretty yummy.

Jet contrails weave an abstract grid across the heavens as we head for Roanoke and stop at Ikenberry's Apple Orchard store. More yummy stuff is there to tempt us and we leave with several sacks of apples. Would we sample a couple on the way home? You bet!

It is 4 PM and 1131 Heath Avenue comes into view.



It has been a great trip but home looks awfully good, too. The interesting people we have met and the breathtaking scenery live on in our hearts as a memory of this good trip to the coal country of West Virginia.

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