

Come join us on a trip into the West Virginia Mountains in 2005.

The Mountains Keep Calling Me

It is October 20, 2005 at 4:21 AM and we are off on another odyssey. It is still dark with just a few cars and a taxi cruising the streets. The air is cool but not really chilly and we drive along Timberlake Avenue, on our way westward. Already, Christmas trees are glowing in Lowes' windows. I see the new gas station is ready for business. I've lived in this town less than 6 years, but long enough to recognize changes in businesses and signs. There is a sense of comfort in familiarity. My new Virginia home is good.

A possum waddles across the road ahead of us and Jim swerves to miss the little critter. That possum has lousy timing. We also see numerous blobs of deer along the road --more evidence of lousy timing.

Clifton Forge, Virginia is all decked out for the harvest season with shocks of corn tied to every light pole. Each one is secured with a big yellow bow and they look so pretty. We make a much appreciated stop at Hardee's for a quick sausage biscuit.

West of Covington a huge white moon illuminates mountain silhouettes all around us as early morning traffic hurtles westward on Interstate 64. Behind us daylight is bathing the sky with a rosy glow and that light eventually reveals the secrets of all those silhouettes. The big white moon, having fulfilled its job description for another night, fades away into somebody else's view.

It is 7:11AM and we cross the state line into West Virginia. It's been four months since we were last here. There is enough daylight now to see that the trees are dressed in their fall colors. Yes! This will be an excellent trip!

At the White Sulphur Springs rest area we stop for a bit. It is 50 degrees and you can see your breath. Fall is on its way.

Just for the fun of it, we start our usual "cow herd counting contest". Don't tell Jim but I skunked him this time! Pink and lavender wildflowers fill the median and sparkle in the morning sunshine.

East Meadow Creek is a pretty place and we rarely miss an opportunity to stop there. We are not disappointed this time. There is a sense of quiet peace here. Naturally, a train rolls by and Jim is a happy camper with his camera. We meet a man along the river who moved back there three years ago from Chicago. Oh, yes, another example of West Virginian residents' ingenuity appears along the road. Somebody is living in a mobile home and is tearing down an old house beside it, using the recycled lumber to actually build a new home around that trailer. The end

result is looking pretty good so far.

Sandstone Visitors Center is another stop and we always enjoy their film presentation.



Here we chat with a lady who tells us that her mother-in-law lives in northern Illinois in a small town called Freeport. What a small world!

We travel the back highways and inhale the scenery. Sunshine filters through the trees to cast its golden glow over our world. Clouds are banking in the west so we need to enjoy the shimmer while it lasts today.

Near Layland, WV, we stop to take pictures of an abandoned mine which sits across a small creek and hints of better economic days in this area. A cluster of dogs across the road loudly protest our presence.

The road hugs sheer walls of rocks on one side while rivers run far below us on the other side. We are led up, down, and around the mountains with our ears “a-poppin’”. There are amazingly well-kept roads here with numerous patch jobs wherever rainfall creates its own river and takes out the pavement.

We take a detour through Quinnimont and find the yards filled with trains. I am cheering as I use my new camera to get a great picture of a train coming out of Stretcher’s Neck Tunnel into the morning sunlight.



This tunnel was built between 1930 and 1932 and is almost 1600 feet long.. Next stop is Prince where we watch a hopper train roll by. The station is closed today but we peek through the windows to see the Chessie Kitty emblem embedded in the waiting room floor.



As we tool along the back roads, Jim sees a road leading to a town near Thurmond so the plan is made to go there --- we have a very precise travel itinerary, you see. Aha! Oak Hill and a Subway Shop! Jim fills the car's gas tank and I order hot meatball subs to fill our tummies, too.

I thought he wanted to carry lunch along to Thurmond but he wants to eat NOW! Ever try eating a very juicy meatball sub (with lots of extras) as you drive seven miles of curvy, narrow road? Take it from me; it's not a pretty experience. Next time we shall dine on something less gooey and drippy.

The visitors' Center at Thurmond is closed today but we spend several hours trooping around the old yards and chat with a young couple from Ontario.



We leave and take a narrow blacktopped side road until it crosses a very nice bridge and immediately turns into a dirt path. Oops! Time to backtrack.

Once in Beckley, WV, we easily find our Best Western Motel and haul in our suitcase. Jim calls his dad's cousin, Dorothy, who lives about a mile away and tells her we are in town. Dorothy and Doe Puckett are 88 and 93, live in a classy home, and are most gracious as they and Jim catch up on family history. Later, after supper at a Bob Evans restaurant, we spend the evening dozing in front of the TV. It is nice just to be together. I am so blessed!

Friday, October 21 and 58 degrees. Morning dawns late and foggy. We watch a bit of TV till the fog lifts enough to see across the street, then do a quick driving tour of downtown Beckley. It is a pretty town with lots of proud history. The court house will be beautiful when its restoration is finished. Pea soup fog tries its best to disguise the red and gold leaves but they glow anyway. Cosmos wild flowers in the center median pay no mind to all this fog. The sun is beginning to burn its way into view and the colorful trees are taking advantage of the morning light to "strut their stuff".

We head for the New River Bridge and see a sign which states that this marvel is the western hemisphere's longest arch bridge.



A tour of the Visitors' Center is informative but the real learning experience comes when we take a blacktopped, white knuckle, cow path to the bottom of the gorge and park beneath the monstrous bridge. And to think this was the only way across here before the new bridge was built! I wonder how many vehicles ended up in the river. Jim won't let me carry home the souvenir rock of my choice (probably weighs a ton) so I settle for a wimpy little one.



He just does not understand my logic in these "rock things". Bev Kruse got nervous when we drove on the Blue Ridge Parkway. She should be along today. Oh, boy! When this little red Cavalier was purchased in 1997 in the flatlands of northern Illinois, I never dreamed it would be clawing its way up and down West Virginia's mountains in a few years.

At the very bottom of the gorge we park along the CSX track to wait for a train photo opportunity.

The signals are green. Ah, success! A hopper train passes by westbound and we hear on the scanner that Amtrak's Cardinal is somewhere nearby, on its way to New York.

I sit comfortably in the car, doing my current plastic canvas project as vehicles rumble 876 feet above me across the Route 19 Bridge and the New River rushes over the rocks beside me. The laughter of rafters echoes off the mountains and some of the rafters apparently get a kick out of hearing their own echoes. I can almost hear the miners' kids a hundred years ago doing the same thing.

The scanner crackles its message of the oncoming Amtrak and peace is within me as Jim happily strolls the area with his cameras. The sun sneaks in and out of the clouds, giving him a challenge for lens settings for Amtrak. There is much more traffic down this road than I expected -- mostly SUV's and pickup trucks with out-of-state plates. I stand on the Tunney Hunsaker Bridge, built in 1997, and look up at the arch bridge.



That thing is some kind of Tinker Toy! Traffic looks about the size of Matchbook cars and they look to be barely moving, even though, in reality, they are whipping along at 65 MPH. Don't you wonder what those miners' kids, who might have been echoing their laughter off these mountains, would have thought of such a sight? Ah, technology and the good old American know-how.

I watch as two raft-loads of adventurers navigate the whitewater. They get a wild ride and their shrieks rise above the sound of the churning water. The miners' kids probably did that too -- but on logs instead -- and they didn't need to pay a guide to show them how.

There is a constant flow of people parking here with cameras. We meet a lady and her mom from Florida. They were originally from near Bedford, New Hampshire, where Larry and Ellen now live. Another train passes westward and tripods are quickly put in place as shutters click. A couple from Belgium joins the “shutter crew”. As they leave, they wave “good-bye“. There are friendly people all over this world.

We are on the move again, across the Tunney Hunsaker Bridge. When the arch bridge was built, the old Route 82 Bridge was torn down and was replaced with this new one.



It is very sturdy and, hopefully, will withstand any floods the New River will send its way. Now we wind our way back up out of the gorge on the opposite side of the river with the monster bridge looming above us.



Three miles of one-way curves stretch ahead of us. A sign in a parking lot warns you to “Be Bear Aware”. No problem! I promise to let those guys alone.

Part way up the mountain a grouse is standing on the road with absolutely no fear. We stop and Jim takes a picture. Mountain streams gurgle their way over the rocks.



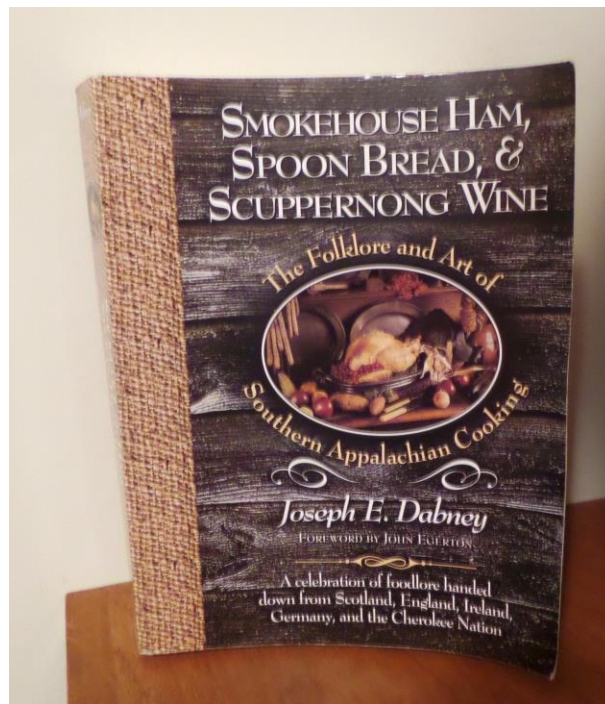
We are now up in the golden trees again.

Whew! Back on the main highway again and we are still in one piece. We take a side road to

Kaymoor -- more curves with lots of purple asters and fuchsia phlox. Eventually we run out of road and are in a campsite at Kaymoor Top. Here the signs warn of "Plentiful Poison Ivy" and rattlesnakes and copperheads. Again, no problem! I won't be staying here long!

Saturday, October 22... 7:30AM with rain and it is still dark as we leave Best Western with cups of coffee in hand. We are in our own world as we curve our way on the seven miles of road toward Thurmond. It is a peaceful feeling. The rain has stopped and the leaves gently flutter to the earth before us. I NEVER tire of this place!

We chat with the Park Ranger and eventually the New River Train passes by with 24 cars. This year they do not stop at the station so excitement is muted. As expected, the passengers are grinning and waving and we are envious of their marvelous adventure today. The Thurmond Visitors' Center has a good supply of books for sale and you just know who must buy a cookbook, "Smokehouse Ham, Spoon Bread, and Scuppernong Wine (The Folklore and Art of Southern Appalachian Cooking)" by Joseph E. Dabney.



It is 450 pages of fascination for me. Someday soon I will get the art of making moonshine perfected.

As we amble through the mountains, we spot yet another creative mobile home owner. These folks have re-sided their mobile home with bricks. At noon we are back on Highway 19, heading north. The trees are really putting on a show today despite the clouds. Lavender cosmos fill many median spots. Those flowers are loving this moisture. We drive over the arch bridge across the New River Gorge and marvel that yesterday we were "way down there!" That black-topped cowpath we took to the bottom twenty four hours ago would be pretty hairy in this

rain.

Winding Route 60 leads us through some of the prettiest scenery yet as we thread our way back to Interstate 64. Soon we are in Lewisburg and stop at Walmart. I am on the hunt for some special purple yarn for a plastic canvas project and we hit the jackpot. This grandma is satisfied and Jim is relieved!

We make our “must go to” side trip to Ronceverte, WV. Parking along the tracks, Jim reminisces about a friend who lived nearby many years ago. It is raining again but we are warm, cozy, and content with our good life today and memories of good friends past.

Super 8 in Lewisburg has our room ready, then supper at Bob Evans’ Restaurant continues its usual yummy reputation.

Sunday, October 23: 39 degrees and no clouds. It’s gonna be a good day! We are on a roll again. Lewisburg is a pleasant town with lighted pumpkins in many windows and harvest wreaths on the front doors. Frost remains on the roofs as the sun glows over a distant mountain top. Beautiful North Caldwell Depot is still photogenic and Jim gets some great mood shots of it as dense fog shrouds the nearby picturesque Greenbrier River.

It is 8:22AM as we cross back into Virginia and it looks just as pretty here as it did in West Virginia. Oh, such a gorgeous world we live in! Route 64 meanders through shadowed canyons of jagged rocks and golden trees as the sun overcomes the fog.

The unchanging beauty of Moss Run is before us again. This has to be the most peaceful spot on earth. Mr. Sun is behind us, warming the rocks beside us and accenting the maroon cacti seed pods along the parking area.



Once again, Jim is out on patrol with a camera in hand. Three deer stroll across the tracks west

of us, unaware that an eastbound is on its way. Somewhere, far away, a crow caws his warning as the rumble of the train becomes audible. A squirrel scurries across the lane with a big acorn in tow -- it will be winter soon and this little guy will be ready. Yesterday's rain has evaporated from the leaves, allowing them to shimmer in the gentle mid-morning breeze. Clouds play tag across a distant mountainside. Jim comments as we drive away, "I just hate to leave this place!"

But Lynchburg and responsibilities are calling so we wander homeward with a couple of detours for more train photo opportunities and stop at Ikenberry's Apple Orchard Store, a fun place to stop for the traditional goodies of the season. The trees near home are beginning to turn so we will be enjoying the glorious fall colors again in a week or two.

Soon 1131 Heath Avenue comes into view and we are, once again, in our comfortable home, planning our next adventure. There is room in the back seat if you want to come along next time.