Sixkiller Knob In Madison County

The Worst Road And The Best Folks

By MANLEY WADE WELLMAN

Raleigh News & Observer

SIXKILLER KNOB — Driving west from the lowlands, you like the highways. Mostly they're four lanes, striding over heights and slicking through hollows, with big signs about your tax money at work. They're a pleasant river of pavement, as far as Asheville. But beyong Asheville, into Madison County — "Bloody Madison" it used to be called, and its folks wear the name like a proud medal well deserved — the road isn't a pleasant hard-topped river anymore.

It's a lean, wriggling snake, scrambling over mountains called Walnut and Hurricane, steep up and down. It's snaky-tricky too, and if you don't know what you're driving on, it can be snaky-mean. It can near about wriggle you off its shiny back, up against the mountain"s hard jowl to one side or down, down into your long home on the other.

There's a fairly new and fairly nice bypass around Marshall, the county seat, that's two miles long and one street wide beside the French Broad River. But get beyond the bypass, back on U.S. 25-70, and folks say, "This here's the worst road to be called a U. S. highway anywheres in this here land of liberty."

Natural Folks

Your friends welcome you back. They're the natural people, not out of Li'l Abner or John Fox Jr. The men are long and lean as old home-made rifles, or as chunky as boulders. There are women so ugly flies light on them, and other women as pretty as ever you saw in a picture show. They break the hills for their daily bread and build their homes in the rock.

"A man's plumb got to be happy here," says Obray Ramsey. He has Indian eyes and his cheeks bracket to a ready grin. They say he's the best rifle shot in these parts, and you know he's near about the world's best banjo-picker. "Got to be happy," he says, "So hard to get in or out by what they call this road, you'd be better off staying."

Others come around. You sit with them on the porch, facing toward U.S. 25-70. Behind the house is high country that's what high country was in, say, 1858. There's talk about hunts and frolics, how to load your own rifle shell so that the bullet will go where you aim it, knock over a deer or bear or wildcat or, if you're bad shoved, knock over a mean man who's fixing to knock you over.

"The mean ones are the most part gone,'" says Obray. Them that gave Madison the name of bloody. They're dead in the midst of life, or if they are still living, it's in prison. Not much of that rough crowd any more, except a few young boys getting big enough to want to look for a fight."

"Anybody wants a fight up here," allows another, "he'll find somebody to accommodate him, sooner or later."

In front, the lean, steep road is rough with patches like an old beat up pair of pants. Yonder on Hurricane, there are two passing lanes in eight miles. Here on Walnut, none. Other side of the road, a lofty plunge down to the Laurel River. Beyond, a long look toward crouch-backed mountains one the line between Carolina and Tennessee. A car howls past and down, around one cup-handle bend, around another that all but flings it back the way it came.

"Look at that fellow hang on his steering wheel," says Obray, squinting his Indian eyes. "He'd better hang onto it, else he'll take wing and sail up among them service trees."

You're polite enough to say it's not much of a road at that.

"Never call it a road, call it a trail," a voice bids you. "It might could do for moccasins. Maybe for a stagecoach, with all six horses leaning back and the driver stomping the brake lever. But otherwise . . . "

A truck lurches down, swaying like a runaway elephant. Another comes up, slow, slower, shifting from gear to powerful gear.

"My idea of nothing to do is drive a big truck through here," drawls a man with a week's black whiskers on his square face.

"They jackknife on a quick bend," says Obray, who's watched it happen many times. "They squash on the rocks or they fall down yonder." Far below, the river rushes with a bright shout. Spring turns to summer as you watch, the sentinel trees are strong with leaves.

"Pick me a song one time," you ask Obray.

Sings And Plays

He picks banjo, plays old songs you ask for, and sings them, high, true-pitched. He picks and sings one or two you've never heard, only heard about. Songs of true lovers parted forever, songs of death in lonely places with none to hear a plea for mercy.

"I wish I was on some tall
mountain,
Where the ivy grows as
black as ink . . . "

Again a big truck, on the slow, dogged upward crawl, and behind it a dawdling procession of cars that dare not try to pass.

"This here's the prince of places for a car to heat up, slowing that away," comments one of the group.

"I've given a many a heated car water," nods Obray. His fingers on the banjo strings are skilled as a surgeon's:

"She came down the
stair,
Combing back her yellow
hair,
And her cheecks were as
red as the rose . . . "

"There goes a state truck," you venture. "They must be getting ready to fix this highway."

"Just patch it," amends Obray. "Patch somewheres, else a fellow might fall all the way through to Communist China." He sings:

"Another has won her,
I'm sorry to tell,
And she left me no warning,
no word of farewell . . . "

They had quite an election in Madison County last fall. The Republicans won every county office. This present gathering is of Democrats. They call the Republicans Radicals, as though Grant were in the White House, W. W. Holden in the State House, and Kirk's militia looking down honest men's throats.

"It's getting right hard to handle this part of Madison County for the Democrats," remarks Obray. "The politicians talk so much about giving us better roads.'"

Worst Roads

"Should ought to talk about better roads," offers another. "Ain't no worse roads, no where on this earth."

They glower at U. S. 25-70, scaled and scabbed with clumsy mendings. It looks like an unmade bed for goblins.

"One time somebody wanted to be governor and came up here to [illegible]," Obray remembered. "That night I told the folks, first thing he'd say was to promise us better roads. Sure enough, he did. It was like the birds singing. I warrant he was puzzled why everybody laughed so hard at him."

There's talk about the governors North Carolina used to have. The name of Kerr Scott is spoken kindly. They recollect that Scott got hard top on some roads here and there, and electric lines up among the eternal mountains. People have bright lights and water heaters, and deep freezers stored with meat of their own killing, deer and bear and groundhog and [illegible]

[illegible] below staggers a car, [illegible] ledge opposite. Ohio, [illegible] license. Two men get [illegible] young one and an older one. They come across to you and Obray and the others.

"Isn't there any other way to get over this mountain?" asks the older man, half-truculently, half-plaintively.

"Why, yes, sir," says Obray, and his voice is bland. "You might have thought of it for your own self."

"What way's that?"

"You could fly," says Obray, the very soul of helpfulness.

The young man barks a laugh. The older one crinkles this mouth.

"Just Sit Here"

"I was afraid something like that," he mumbles, and looks at you and Obray and the rest. "Let me ask you," he says suddenly, "how do you mountain people live up here? What do you do?"

"We don't do a damned thing," Obray informs him. "We just sit here on the porch."

Back go the Ohioans, getting into their car and creep windingly toward the top of Walnut, where they'll creep windingly down the other side, now up there, now down there. Maybe they'll be able to breathe again when they get near Asheville.

The sun slides toward those distant western mountains. The foretaste of evening is in your mouth. A bird sings, "Sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-peaches!" Everybody looks at U. S. 25-70. No signs hereabouts concerning your tax dollars at work. Maybe because they aren't working on that stretch of U.S. 25-70.

"Well now," says a wide-hatted man, who got pretty badly hurt by the Republican sweep, "we get us another election next year."

"And I'll be trying to get the Democrat vote out," says Obray. "I'm going to tell the people about better schools."

"And better roads?" you suggest, and Obray grins at you as if you'd taken leave of the last lick of sense you ever had.

Best Folks

"I might be wise not to do that," he says. "You know, Madison is supposed to be the meanest country in the United States. I wouldn't want any Madison County voter to think I was trying to tell him a lie." Obray looked off somewhere. "Folks hereabout has been known to kill liars."

Touching the banjo, he changes the subject:

"Love is fair and love is charming,
And love is pretty when it is new—
When love grows older, love
grows colder
And fades away like the
morning dew. . . . "

Married Saturday

Mrs. Harry Waldrup

* * *

MISS RANDOLPH BECOMES BRIDE OF H. S. WALDRUP

Ceremony Held Saturday In Bethel Baptist Church

Miss Rebecca Jane Randolph and Harry Stanley Waldrup were united in marriage Saturday, July 24, 1965 in Bethel Baptist Church by the Rev. T. S. Henderson.

The bride is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Lot Randolph of Mars Hill. She is a senior at Western Carolina College. The bridegroom is employed in Shelby where they will live, after three years U. S. Army service. He is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Tracy Waldrup.

The bride wore an Empire organza gown with lace appliquest and a veil attached to a coronet. She was given in marriage by her father.

Honor attendants were Mrs. William Jarvis, sister of bride, and Miss Judy Robinson. Bridesmaids were Mrs. Jerry Webb and Miss Lucretia Waldrup, sisters of the bridegroom, Mrs. James Davis and Miss Charlene Harrison. They wore pink peau de soie gowns and carried nosegays of summer flowers. Saundra Waldrup was flower girl.

Gary Waldrup was his brother's best man and ushers were Wayne Ballard, Gary Randolph, brother of the bride, Jerry Webb, William Jarvis and Wayne Mayner.

A reception in the Randolph home followed, with the bride's parents, assisted by Mrs. Wayne Taylor, Miss Sandra Duck, Miss Rosalind Duck, Miss Linda Duck, Miss Kathy Randolph and Mrs. Lester Goddy.

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Hot Springs News

R. C. KIRBY, Correspondent

Mrs. Lloyd Price and daughter, Selma are visiting in Monroe, Va. this week.

The Kenneth Haggett family of Springfield, Va., are the guests of Mrs. Mona Swann at this time.

Mrs. Carol Anderson and children, Andrew and Hannah are spending two weeks with her mother, Mrs. Pauline Cooper of Rocky Mount.

Mrs. O. W. Grubbs is steadily improving in St. Joseph's Hospital and is expected home in a few days.

A covered dish supper will be served at the Presbyterian Church Thursday night. Rev. Ted Finley and wife, Missionaries to Mexico, will show films of his work in Mexico. Mr. Finley is a native of Madison County.

1,450 TROUT RELEASED IN COUNTY WATERS

In accordance with previously approved plans, the Wildlife Resources Commission has completed stocking 1,450 trout averaging 8 to 10 inches in length, in the waters of Madison County. These fish were produced at the Federal Fish Hatchery located near Pisgah Forest. Madison County Game and Fish Protectors Raymond Ramsey and Clyde Huntsinger directed the release of the fish and solicited assistance from members of the local wildlife club and other interested sportsmen.

The Wildlife Resources Commission points out that the cooperative effort of all those interested in the State's fish and game resources will be required to bring about better fishing, the favorite outdoor recreation of so many Americans.

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Mrs. John Worley Passes Saturday; Funeral Monday

Mrs. John Worley, 80, of Hot Springs Rt. 1, died Saturday, July 24, 1965 in her home after a long illness.

She was a resident of Madison County for 60 years.

Surviving are a son, Henry Worley of Hot Springs Rt. 1; three daughters, Mrs. Homer Allison of Hot Springs Rt. 1, Mrs. Press Waldrop of Campobello, S. C. and Mrs. Ira Brown of Canton Rt. 3; a brother, Jake Moore of Greeneville, Tenn.; seven grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

Services were held at 11 a.m. Monday in Liberty Baptist Church on Spring Creek, of which she was a member for the past 50 years.

The Rev. Dewey Rogers officiated and burial was in the church cemetery.

Bowman Funeral Home was in charge.

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