



Blackwater Roots

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The Virginian Canaan, Part I

Story and illustrations by David Hunter Strother under the pen name, Porte Crayon

In Randolph County, Virginia, is a tract of country containing from seven to nine hundred square miles, entirely uninhabited, and so savage and inaccessible that it has rarely been penetrated even by the most adventurous. The settlers on its borders speak of it with a sort of dread, and regard it as an ill-omened region, filled with bears, panthers, impassable laurel-brakes, and dangerous precipices. Stories are told of hunters having ventured too far, becoming entangled, and perishing in its intricate labyrinths. The desire of daring the unknown dangers of this mysterious region, stimulated a party of gentlemen, who were at Towers' Mountain House on a trout excursion, to undertake it, in June, 1851. They did actually penetrate the country as far as the Falls of Blackwater, and returned with marvelous accounts of its savage grandeur, and the quantities of game and fish to be found there. One of the party wrote an entertaining narrative of their adventures and sufferings, which was published in a stout volume which every body ought to read.

During the winter of 1852, several of the same party, with other friends, planned a second trip, to be undertaken on the first of

June following. At that date, so fully was the public mind occupied, with filibustering and President-making, that the notes of preparation for this important expedition were scarcely heard beyond the corporate limits of the little town of M——, in the Valley of Virginia. Even in this contracted circle the excitement was principally confined to the planners themselves, while the public looked on with an apathy and unconcern altogether unaccountable. Indeed, some narrow-minded persons went so far as to say, that it was nothing but a scheme of idleness to waste time; and advised the young gentlemen to stick to their professions, and let the bears alone. But, as may be supposed, all such met the usual fate of gratuitous counselors who advise people against their inclinations.

In the daily meetings which were held for five months previous to the date fixed for their departure, our adventurers discussed freely and at great length every thing that appertained, or that could in any way appertain, to the subject in view, from the elevation of the mountains and course of the rivers, down to the quality of a percussion cap and the

bend of a fish-hook. They became students of maps and geological reports; read Izaak Walton's "Complete Angler" and "Le Guide et Hygiene des Chasseurs;" consulted Count Rumford and Doctor Kitchener, and experimented largely in the different kinds of aliments most proper for the sustenance of the human system. Mr. Penn, the author, copied at length a recipe for making cat-fish soup, assuring his friends that when surfeited with venison and trout, this dish would afford them a delightful change. Mr. Porte Crayon, the artist, also furnished frequent designs for hunting-coats, caps, knapsacks, and leggings, modeled, for the most part, from those of the French army in Algiers; "For," said he, "the French are the most scientific



people in the world; and as they have paid more attention to the equipment of their army than any other, every thing they adopt is presumed to be perfect of its kind.

The result of all this studying and talking was, that every one differed from his friend, and equipped himself after his own fashion; and the commissary department suddenly concluded that biscuit and bacon were the most substantial, portable, and palatable articles of food known to the dwellers south of the Potomac, and accordingly made arrangements to have ample supplies of both ready for the occasion.

With the opening spring the buds began to swell and the blue-birds to warble, and the zeal of our adventures kept pace with the season, so that by the first of April all were ready, fully equipped, "straining like grayhounds in the slip." The intolerable vacuum between this and the starting day might be graphically illustrated by leaving half a dozen blank pages; but as such a procedure might be misunderstood, or characterized as clap-trap, it may be preferable to fill up the blank by introducing the *dramatis persona* who are to figure in the following narrative:

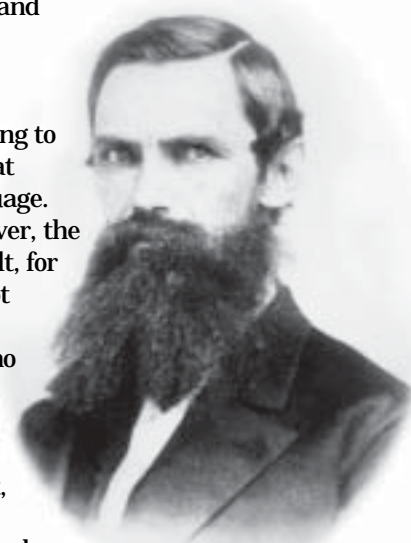
Mr. Penn, an author of some distinction, has

already been mentioned. He is gaunt and tall, with distinguished air and manners, flowing and graceful gestures, prominent and expressive eye, indicating, according to Phrenology, a great command of language. In this case, however, the science was at fault, for when Mr. Penn got fairly started in discourse he had no command over his language at all. It poured forth in an irresistible torrent, carrying away the speaker himself, and overwhelming or putting to flight his audience.

Mr. Dindon, a fine, athletic sportsman, not a dandiical popper at quails and hares, but a real Nimrod, a slayer of wild turkeys and deer, to whom the excitement of the chase was as the breath of his nostrils; and who sometimes forgot even that in his keen appreciation of the poetry of forest life. He was never known either to be wearied in a hunt or silenced in a debate.

Mr. Jones was somewhat inclined to be stout, not to say fat. Mr. J. was equally fond of rural sports and personal comforts. Ambitious of being considered a thoroughgoing sportsman, he kept the best dog and the most beautiful gun in his district. He frequently

appeared covered with his hunting accoutrements, followed by his dog, and



David Hunter Strother
1816-1888

generally went out alone. Prying persons remarked that his game-bag was usually fuller when he went out than when he returned. Dindon, who was knowing in these matters, always said that Mr. J. was a humbug; that all this apparent fondness for the chase was a sham; that Jones, as soon as he got out of sight of town, found some shady place, ate the dinner that stuffed the game-bag, and went to sleep; when he woke, would drag himself through a thicket hard by, muddying his boots in a swamp, and return with the marks of severe fatigue and determined hunting upon him, and with

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Blackwater Family Stories

My Story

by Margaret Calwell

Excerpts from Speak to the Past: A Memoir Fat With Words by Margaret Calwell
 Order book from www.saveblackwater.org or by calling 1-877-WVA-LAND



Margaret Calwell in the 1930s above Blackwater Falls

CHAPTER 1, The Town. The history of my family is in the fabric of growth, flourishing and decline of Davis. Its charter was dated 1889, and it was named for Henry G. Davis, a United States Senator from West Virginia. Senator Davis saw the vast economic opportunities to be realized from coal and timber on the 25,000-acre area of Davis District, plus thousands more nearby. In 1895 there were 600 dwelling houses and a population of almost 3,000. In 1930, the population was 1,656, and in 1960, there were 320 homes and a population of 894. Since then, the population has again increased due to the expansion of tourism.

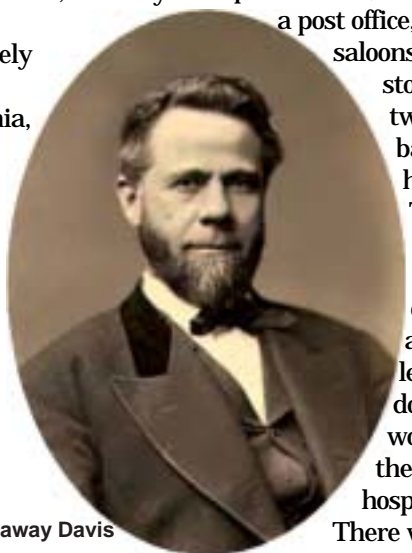
Davis was an industrial lumber town. The first lumber mill was erected in 1886 and was the largest along the West Virginia Central Railroad at that time. It was a band mill at first but later became a circular saw operation when it was sold to the Babcock Boom and Lumber Company. It was damaged by fire in 1893 and sold to a Pennsylvania company for \$110,000. The first owners were from Maine.

They were the Thompson family, and far from being absentee owners, this educated, cultured family was involved in the town's economic and social development as well as that of nearby Canaan Valley. In the 1970s, one of the family's descendants, Ben Thompson, was living on a 1000-acre farm in the valley, raising sheep, cattle, and vegetables. My father, a dedicated fisherman, fished the streams that ran through his farm.

The Blackwater Lumber Company, a band mill, was run day and night in 1899, and output increased to 40,000,000 feet. Hemlock logs averaged over 250 feet or four to the thousand. The largest single day's cut was 147,317 feet. Logging railroads were extended and brought in many workers. These railroads were extended into Canaan Valley and down the narrow Blackwater gorge and canyon to Parsons and eastward to Cumberland, Maryland. The Blackwater Lumber Company sold to the Thompson Lumber Company in 1905, who sold to the Babcock Lumber and Boom Company in 1907. Except for the Thompsons, the owners were from the Northeast and New York and Pennsylvania. There were two sawmills, a box factory, planning mill, 40 miles of standard-gauge railroad, and thousands of acres of timberland. Jobs included millwrights, sorters, yard bosses, foremen, paymasters, skidders, carpenters,

edgers, masons, sawyers, setters, burners, firemen. My grandfather was a sawyer. The railroads employed wood crews, cranemen, firemen, and engineers.

In 1907, Babcock changed their wood crews to foreign labor, largely Austrian. There were many nationalities living in Davis, probably more diverse than any other area of the state. The labor that cut and manufactured the timber over the years was a mixed lot. West Virginians certainly played a role in the development, but they were few, comparatively speaking. Pennsylvania, New York, Michigan, and New England contributed liberally. A large number of Swedes came in



Henry Gassaway Davis
1823-1916

1892-93. Names of immigrants reveal that they came from almost every European country.

Other early influences during the operation of plants, mills, etc. were visits by lumbermen from elsewhere. A forestry school at Lansing, Michigan, sent its logging classes to the Babcock plant. In 1915, the Royal Forester of Japan, with a large corps of assistants, visited the operation. Engineering students from Carnegie Tech, in

Pittsburgh, came for 6 weeks each summer for 15 years. The cultural impact of these groups cannot be measured. Davis was truly a metropolitan little town. There were two hotels, many boarding houses, opera houses, a theater, a post office, schools, saloons, many stores, two banks, a hospital. Two dentists had offices and at least two doctors worked at the hospital. There were two barber shops, a mortician who served Davis and Canaan Valley, and of course garages with mechanics.

Related industries included a shingle factory, handle factory, box factory, kindling wood factory, tannery, pulpwood mills, and paper mills. The box factory made boxes of various sizes, in sections, and shipped flat to many companies. Today a wood box is an antique. Many young men coming to Davis, as well as those already living there,

earned their first paychecks by working at the box factory. The kindling wood factory, owned by a company in Maine, manufactured kindling wood from the slabs and trimmings from the sawmills and made into bundles. This was the first industry in Davis to provide employment for women. Seventy-five women worked there at wages of 75 cents a day. The tannery, built in 1886 and later sold to the United States Leather Company, did a large business until 1919. Three hundred men were employed in cutting and peeling bark and in processing animal hides; 700 hides were processed daily. Many of the men bought shoe lasts and were given scraps of shoe leather to repair shoes for their families. The West Virginia Pulp and Paper Mill was built in 1892 and operated until 1919. This plant was rated at that time as one of the finest and most perfect of its kind in the United States. It provided work for 400 men and put out fifty tons of pulp per day. In 1919, the workers went on strike in sympathy with workers at Tyrone, Pennsylvania. The mill closed, never reopened, and its buildings stood on the pulp mill grounds for

a long time. Many good citizens left Davis when this mill closed. In 1929, a garment factory opened in Davis with 36 machines. This project was sponsored by the Davis Manufacturing Company, composed of ten progressive businessmen of the town. It had to close during the Depression.

Davis was thus an industrial town but not a real mining town. Several small mines provided coal for the railroads, but there were few miners. However, after the lumber and lumber-related industries closed, many men went to work in mines in nearby towns. Later, in the 1930s and 1940s, there was coal prospecting, and after World War II, strip mining laid bare many acres of former timberland. Those areas have been largely reclaimed.

By 1919, the growth of Davis as an industrial town had peaked. The land had been stripped of its timber, and lumber companies and their managers were slowly leaving. In the 1920s a new wave of immigrants began coming. Many were from countries already well-represented—Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Yugoslavia, Germany,



Liberty Theatre

Canaan

whatever game he might be able to purchase from straggling urchins or old negroes who had been lucky with their traps. For the rest, Mr. Jones had some rare companionable qualities. He could give a joke with enviable point and readiness, and take one with like grace and good-humor

The sprightly sketches which illuminate this unskillful narrative are the most appropriate and shall be the only introduction of our friend Porte Crayon. He has rendered the subjects with great truthfulness, and has exhibited even some tenderness in the handling of them. If he has nothing extenuated, he has, at least, set down naught in malice. Porte, indeed, modestly remarks that his poor abilities were entirely inadequate to do justice either to the sublimity of the natural scenery or the preposterous absurdity of the human species on that memorable expedition.

Mr. Smith, a gentleman of imposing presence, of few words, but an ardent and determined sportsman, and a zealous promoter of the expedition, completes the catalogue.

Sometime during the month of May, X. M. C. (for certain reasons his initials only are used) an accomplished and talented gentleman residing at a distance from M——, received a letter which ran as follows:

“Dear X. — We have fixed upon the 1st of June to start for the Canaan Country. Our party will consist of Dindon, Jones, Smith, your old friend Penn, and myself. Can you join us? If so, give us immediate notice, and set about making your preparations without delay. I would recommend to you to procure the

following equipment: a water-proof knapsack, fishing tackle, and a gun; a belt with pistols — a revolver would be preferable, in case of a conflict with a panther; a hunting-knife for general purposes — a good ten-inch blade, sharp and reliable. It will be useful for cleaning fish, dressing game, and may serve you a turn when a bear gets you down in a laurel-brake. Store your knapsack with an extra pair of shoes, a change of raiment, such as will resist water and dirt to the last extremity, a pair of leggings to guard against rattlesnakes, and the following eatables: one dozen biscuit, one pound of ham, one pound of ground coffee, salt, pepper, and condiments. This will be the private store of each person, the public supplies will be carried out on horses.

The place of rendezvous is the Berkeley Springs, the day the 31st of May.

Yours in haste, Porte Crayon.”

The Corresponding Committee had the gratification of receiving a favorable reply to the foregoing:

“Mr. X. will certainly come.”

All right; the party is made up. The last of May has come. Mr. Crayon, in full hunting costume, is standing on the portico of the great hotel at the Berkeley Springs. Messrs. Jones and Smith have arrived; their equipments have been examined and pronounced unexceptionable. Here comes X. What a pair of leggings! And there's Penn with him, in a blue blouse out at the elbows, with a rod like Don Quixote's lance. “Ah, gentlemen! Well met,” shouted Penn, as they approached.

“You see before you a personification of

Prince Hal, at a time when he kept rather low company,” quoth Mr. Jones; “he looks more like Poins on a thieving expedition.”

“Ah! My fat friend, are you there? Glad to see you. I have a rod here, gentlemen, that will make you envious. See how superbly balanced; what a spring it has! The very thing for brook-fishing, for whipping the smaller streams. And then see how easily carried.” And suiting the action to the word, he unjointed it, and slipped it into a neat case, portable, light, and elegant. “I procured one of the same sort for Smith when I was in New York. I will show you also a supply of artificial flies,” continued Mr. Penn, drawing a leather case from his knapsack, “and a fine bug calculated for the largest sized trout.” Here he produced a bug, which renewed the astonishment and hilarity of the company.

“What is it for?” “What sort of creature is it?” “What does it represent?” shouted one and all.”

“I have not dipped into entomology lately, but I have been assured that this bug is calculated to take none but the largest fish. No small fish will approach it, from personal apprehension; and no

trout under twenty-two inches in length would venture to swallow it.”

“If I were called upon to classify that bug,” said Mr. Jones, “I would call it a *Chimera*—in the vernacular, *Humbug!*”

“Come to supper,” said Porte. “We start at two o'clock tonight by the train.”

The sun that rose fair and bright on the morning of the first of June, found our fishermen just entering the United States Hotel, in the town of Cumberland. “Who the — are they?” inquired one of the matutinal loafers in the barroom.

“Oh! They be some o' these Hungry fellers, I reckon,” replied a gaping stable boy.

“Right, boy; right!” said Mr. Jones; “quite right; here's a dime. Landlord, let us have breakfast in the shortest time imaginable.”

The route from Cumberland to the Oakland depot, on the summit of the Alleghenies, and the trip from thence by wagon to Towers', was as barren of notable adventure as it was fruitful in jokes and hilarity. At Towers' they found their old comrade, Mr. Dindon, who had gone ahead to procure guides, horses, etc.

“Well!” What have you brought up?” asked Dindon.

“Eleven hundred and forty biscuit, twenty pounds of ground coffee, forty pounds of middling and two hams; lard, salt, pepper, sugar, et cetera. All well packed and in good order. What have you done?”

“The eight loaves of bread are ready.” “Good.” “The horses are ready.” “Good!” “The guides are still to be looked after.” “Hum!—let us see the horses.”— “Andrew, bring out the animals.”

Lame Kit and Old Sorry here made their first appearance on the stage, and were received with mingled laughter and indignation. Lame Kit's fore-leg was as stiff as a ramrod; and Old Sorry among other defects, was blind and distempered.

“What an inhuman idea!” said Mr. Jones; “You don't really mean to afflict these wretched tackies with such loads of baggage as we have here.” Mr. Dindon was aroused. “I'll bet a thousand dollars you haven't two such horses on your estate.”

“No I'll swear to it,” responded Jones. “If I had, I'd have them shot within an hour.”



“No, sir,” rejoined Dindon, with heat. “I mean that you can't produce their equals for strength and endurance.”

“I won't take advantage of you,” said Jones; “but will offer you a more equal bet: That if you load them with this baggage neither of them will live to reach the banks of the Cheat River.” “That shows your judgment in horseflesh; but what can be expected of a man educated north of the Potomac? What can he know about horses?”

Mr. Jones assumed an attitude confronting Mr. Dindon. “I'd like to know,” said he, “if Northern horses are not universally conceded to be superior to Southern?”

“Gentlemen,” interposed X., “I foresee an interminable wrangle. We'll adjourn—cough them down.”

The following day was spent in engaging guides. Thornhill, an intelligent, energetic, good-tempered fellow, agreed to undertake it. His dwelling was a specimen of rural architecture not noticed by Downing, nor characterized by any of the writers on that subject. Porte declared it looked like the connecting link between a hut and a wood-pile. But, like the pearl in the oyster, the gem of disinterested hospitality is found as frequently in these humble abodes as in the proudest mansions of our good old State.

To be continued in the next issue of *Blackwater Roots*



THORNHILL'S CABIN.



Loading logs by hand by rolling them with peavys up spike-studded inclines. Blackwater Lumber Company, Davis, 1900 Photo from West Virginia Department of Natural Resources

and Russia. There were a German baker, a German tailor, and a German shoemaker. There were stone masons from Poland and a blacksmith from Ireland. There was the Russian bootlegger, an Irish Catholic priest, and an Irish railroad engineer. Many Irish operated boarding houses, hotels, and saloons. There were seven churches and, before Prohibition, seven saloons.

How did my family fit into this complex little town? I have described in my "Grandparents" segment their roles in the ever-unfolding stages of development. My father, Benjamin Thomas Walters, came to Davis in 1902 from Flintstone, Maryland, and was a driver for the Adams Express Company. He never wanted to work for someone else, always preferring to have a business of his own. His first venture was as part owner of the first Nickelodeon, The Casino. In 1913, he built the first and only motion picture theater, named Liberty Theater, which he operated until 1926. It was used for political speakers and campaign functions, for traveling entertainment companies, and for school programs and commencements. I remember being in many

activities there as well as graduating from high school there. When my sister was born, my father had a free movie for the entire town.

My maternal aunt and my mother became school teachers after attending Shepherdstown Normal School. My mother was also a partner in a hat shop. After marriage she did not work until she and my father opened a small grocery store in 1925. I will write a separate chapter about that business venture. She was politically and socially active in church, clubs, and all places where she could find a niche. During World War II she was a custodian at the Women's Federal Prison at Alderson, West Virginia. Few women of her generation reached out in so many ways as she did, a warm personal inspiration and memory for me. My sisters, brothers, and I grew up in

the protected melting-pot, unplanned social experiment that I have tried to describe. Only in retrospect can one begin to put the memories together. By the time the forests were gone, people's lives had become irrevocably woven into relationships which would carry them through two world wars, a depression, and into the new era of technology, business development, and tourism. State parks were built at Blackwater Falls and Canaan. Hotels were replaced by motels. Stores closed as a supermarket grocery took over. No doctors or dentists were left, and people had to travel to nearby cities for medical care. Tourists came by the hundreds to ski, play golf, and engage in other recreational activities. Canaan Valley became a Mecca for those activities, with clusters of recreational and permanent homes. ———



Babcock Lumber and Boom Company, Davis 1910 Photo from West Virginia Geographic and Economic Survey

Blackwater Area Businesses

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| Anywhere Printing,
Coalton 636-6754 | Bright Morning Inn,
Davis 259-5119 | Christmas Shop, Front
Street, Thomas
463-4668 |
| Art Company of Davis,
259-4218 | Brookside Inn, Aurora
588-6344 | Deerfield Village Resort &
Restaurant, Canaan
Valley 866-4698 |
| Art Medium, Elkins
636-6820 | Cheat River Inn and
Restaurant, Elkins
636-6265 | East/West Printing, Davis
259-5606 |
| Blackwater Bikes, Davis
259-5286 | Cheat River Cabins,
Elkins 636-3624 | El Grand Sabor, Elkins
636-8200 |

Blackwater Calendar

August

- 16-20 Tucker County Fair, Camp Kidd Park, Parsons
- 20 Night Flight Golf Tournament, Canaan Valley State Park
- 20 Climate Change and Wildlife Refuge Walk 7:00 p.m. Walk led by State Ecologist Elizabeth Byers. Binoculars may be borrowed. This is a free event co-sponsored by the Friends of the 500th and the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge. More information, call 304-866-3858.
- 29 CVR Pro-Am Golf Tournament, Canaan Valley State Park

September

- 2-5 Labor Day Weekend, Canaan Valley
- 3-5 Hick Festival, Camp Kidd Park, Parsons This is an old fashioned event with woodchopping, horsepull, talent show, fiddle and banjo, queen's contest and deep pit beef and chicken barbeque. No admission fee.
- 3 Fall Flea Market, Canaan Valley VFD
- 6-10 Parsons Homecoming, Downtown
- 20-23 18th Annual Senior Fling, Blackwater Falls State Park
- 24-25 Leaf Peepers Festival, Canaan Valley, Davis, and Thomas. More info call, 800-782-2775.
- 24 Conifer Forest Restoration, Help the Canaan Valley Wildlife Refuge plant trees. For more information, please call 304-866-3858.

- Fat Tire Bikes, Elkins
636-0969
- Good Energy Food, Elkins
636-5169
- Highland Scene Inn,
Tours and Spa, Canaan
Valley 877-223-5388.
- La Fontaine Bakery,
Parsons 478-3410
- Lema's Bakery, Thomas
- MoutainMade, Coketon
463-3355
- Mountain Trail Rides,
Canaan Valley 866-4652
- Purple Fiddle, Thomas
304-463-4040
- Riverfront Antique and
Thrift, Thomas
463-4564
- Sirianni's Cafe, Davis
259-5454.
- Ski Barn, Canaan Valley
866-4444
- Wilderness Sports, Davis
259-5857
- Windwood's Amelia Fly-in
Restaurant, Canaan
Valley 866-7456

SaveBlackwater.org
NorthForkWatershed.org

Blackwater Roots is a free, periodic publication of Friends of Blackwater and the North Fork Watershed Project. If you would like to continue receiving Blackwater Roots in the mail or wish to submit your family story, send your request(s) to the Thomas office or call 1-877-WVA-LAND.

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