



# Blackwater Roots

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## The Virginian Canaan, Part III

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

*The Virginian Canaan is a recount of events that took place in June 1851, when a party of gentleman first explored the Blackwater Canyon on a troutng excursion. The following excerpt is the second in a series taken from an article in the December 1853 issue of Harper's New Monthly Magazine. It was this article that made the Blackwater Canyon famous.*



David Hunter Strother  
1816-1888

The hunters had been dodging the laurel-brakes all day. They seemed to dread the passage, and would frequently go miles around to avoid it. They had stories of men who had spent days in them, wandering in circles, and who had finally perished from starvation; and they say when once fairly in there is no calculating when you will get out. Some of these brakes extend for many miles, and are so dense that even deer cannot pass except by

finding the thinnest place, and when the experienced woodman is forced to cross, he always seeks a deer-path. The ponderous strength of the bear enables him to transverse them more easily. In them he makes his lair, and our adventurers often found the laurel recently torn and broken by bears, in going to and from their places of retreat. With the horses the passage could not even be attempted without a pervious clearing of the

way by the ax-men. Upon consultation, it was considered necessary to cross the brake before them and the guides went into it lustily, while the rest of the company, one after another, dropped asleep. In about two hours the way was cleared but it was with much difficulty that the horses could be induced to proceed. The guides swore like an army in Flanders, Kit's stiff leg would not yield to circumstances, and Sorry became several times so tangled that he had to be released by the ax. The footmen passed ahead of the horses, and soon found themselves in similar circumstances. They sank up to their knees in mud and water; they were throttled by the snake-like branches of the laurel, and were frequently obliged to resort to their hunting-knives to extricate a leg or an arm from its grasp. Ascending the stump of a riven hemlock, a striking picture presented itself. The laurel waved up and down as far as the eye could reach, like a green lake, with either shore walled by the massive forest, and out of its bed, rising singly or in groups of three or four, the tallest and most imposing of the fir species. The heads of our adventurers sometimes appeared hidden as they struggled through—and whether visible or invisible, the crackling of braches,

the rustling of leaves, and rolling fire of execrations marked their progress. All else was silent.

Toward evening a bear was seen, but so worn and spiritless were the adventurers that no one thought of pursuing it. All were anxious to reach the river that evening, as they had proposed. At length, the ridge upon which they traveled seemed suddenly to terminate, and they heard far below, the rushing of waterfalls. Here they came willingly to a halt, while the guides descended the mountain to ascertain their position. In the course of an hour they returned, reporting that the roaring was from the Falls of the Blackwater, and that they now overlooked the site of the encampment of the last season. By this time it had grown so dark and rained so heavily that it became indispensable to look out for a place of encampment. The men dispersed to look for water, taking care, however, always to keep within calling distance of each other. Water was soon found on the border of a laurel-brake, a most cheerless spot for a bivouac. The rain fell in torrents. The horses were uploaded, and a young birch cut down for them to browse upon, in default of grass. While some are trying, apparently without success, to get together dry

combustibles for a fire, others endeavored to secure the provisions, arms, and ammunition from the rain; and some sunk down on the spot where they halted, and wrapping their blankets about them, slept in spite of every thing. A more cheerless prospect for a night could scarcely be imagined. With garments soaked, blankets wet, every leaf dripping with water, and the earth covered with moss and dead leaves, like a sponge thoroughly saturated: stiff with fatigue and shivering with cold, there seemed to be little chance of obtaining either rest or fire. Conway's woodcraft, however, triumphed over all difficulties. With knife and hatchet he peeled the bark from a fir about four feet in circumference. With this, he sheltered the fire until it got headway, and then heaping on such wood as was most combustible there was soon a cheerful roaring blaze that defied the rain. He next with forks, props, and cross-poles erected the framework of a shed, twelve or fourteen feet long, which was speedily covered with bark, and afforded a complete shelter. The ground beneath was covered with hemlock branches, shaken and dried over the fire, to serve at once for seats and bedding. Fried middling and hot coffee were then served round, and from a most

forlorn and unpromising beginning our adventurers found themselves in comparatively comfortable circumstances. Mr. Jones was as usual an object of peculiar attention. On their arrival at the halting place, Mr. Jones observed a large hemlock, which threw out its roots like the arm of a sofa. Between them a plump cushion of moss, which had hitherto escaped the rain, seemed to invite him to a seat. Mr. J. accepted the invitation, and set about making himself as comfortable as possible. Upon examining the ground about him, it occurred that just over his seat would be a very proper place to build the shed, and he gave orders accordingly. Whether from a malicious suggestion of someone else, or some sly waggery of his own, Conway took plans to locate the fire and shed some distance off. Mr. Jones argued and remonstrated, but to no effect. The savor of supper enticed him from his lair for a short time, and he then found that the shed was so full there was not room for a ramrod. Mr. Jones was not a ramrod, nor was he to be outdone so easily; he took Conway aside in a mysterious manner, and whispered something in his ear. Conway went out, and soon returned with a



*Continued on pg 3*

# Meshach Browning

## *True Life of a Legendary Hunter*

by J. Lawrence Smith

Early America was blessed with men to match wits and brawn against all the wiles of the wilderness and beasts lurking in its shadows. Their deeds broke a path for those who came to hack an opening in the towering forest, break the sod with the plow and plant a family on the land.

The life of Meshach Browning began in 1781 and lived astride the days of the frontier and later when the land had grown mellow from being robbed of its wildness as well as the wilderness scene.

western Maryland, his reputation as a hunter and woodsman was to reach far beyond.

History has accorded him a place among the most renowned hunters who stalked game in the forbidding forests and glades of the Allegheny Highlands.

The record of Browning's life and adventures is "Forty-four Years of the Life of A Hunter" published in 1859, the year he died. Edward Stabler assisted him in putting his life in print which is fortunate



was 78 when his book was printed.

Browning lived most of his life in a cabin near the hamlet of Sang Run on Ginseng Run in Garrett County. The stream was named for ginseng, the plant regarded as an aphrodisiac or cure-all by people of the Orient and eagerly dug for sale.

He was fearless when on occasion a deer seemed miraculously to come back to life after being shot. Browning would grab its antlers, wrestle the animal to the ground and stab it to death with his hunting knife.

Browning's name has been linked to the discovery of Blackwater Falls, but this seems to be merely a tale. Little credence can be given such a notion since the falls were mostly likely seen by the first person of European descent before Browning was born and he never made such a claim.

Browning ventured from Maryland into what may have been the environs of the Blackwater in search of a place where hunters had been few. Accompanied by his sons, he journeyed along the North Branch of the Potomac for much of a day with a pack horse carrying supplies.

They shot a deer that eluded them and seemingly escaped before they spent an uncomfortable night in a rhododendron thicket where they had difficulty keeping the campfire burning. The deer was

found the following morning and they started home.

On a later trip, Browning became separated from his sons and spent the night sleeping in a large hemlock. Snow was on the ground when he awoke, but the discomfort he had faced was not in vain when he killed a fine buck. The shot attracted his sons and the party was united.

Browning had six sons and no doubt all of them learned the skill of hunting and lore of the woods from their father. His youngest son, Jeremiah or Jerry born in 1819, gained a wide reputation as a guide for parties of sportsmen and adventurers.

Jerry joined novelist Rebecca Harding Davis and companions on a trek into Blackwater country and led them through the wilderness labyrinth. The adventure was recounted in a story "By-Paths In the Mountains" by Davis appearing in "Harper's New Monthly Magazine" in 1880.

Their ramblings in the wilderness brought them close to the Dobbin House not far from the site of Davis and members of the party ventured there to join in the revelry of visitors. The house was a gathering place for

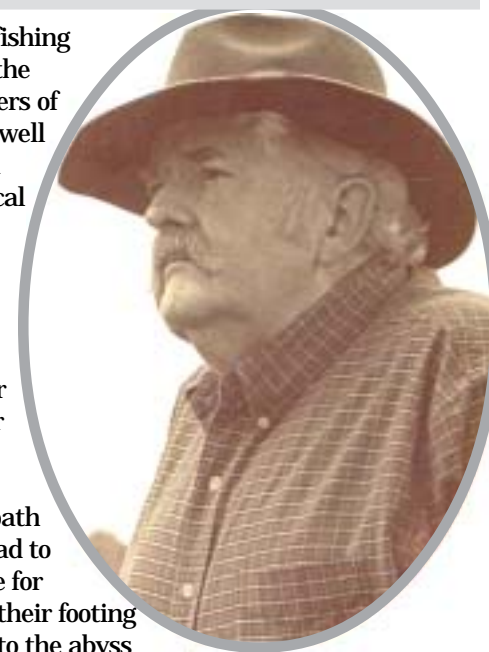
hunting and fishing associates of the Dobbin brothers of Baltimore as well as artists and small theatrical troupes.

One day they trekked eight miles to witness the wild grandeur of Blackwater Falls. They descended a treacherous path where they had to step with care for fear of losing their footing and falling into the abyss of the gorge.

Meshach Browning is buried in a cemetery by Maryland Route 42 not far from the junction with U.S. Route 219 between Friendsville and McHenry. The monument marking his grave and his two wives has somewhat the appearance of an obelisk topped by a cross.

Although located near the front of the graveyard, the monument has a central location among the graves. At least fifty gravestones are present with such names as Matheny and Sebold found along with numerous Brownings.

Both of Browning's wives were named Mary and the one who bore his eleven children was born the same year as



J. Lawrence Smith

Mechach, but he out-lived her by twenty years. His second wife Mary, died in 1857, two years before Meshach.

Had I not been introduced to Mechach Browning and his book by Curtis Rhodes I might never have heard of the renowned hunter and woodsman. My last year at West Virginia University I shared a room in a boarding house in Morgantown with "Sonny" who was from Swanton in Garrett County.

Our mutual interest was the outdoors, although he was a hunter and I a naturalist. He told me of doing battle with a Timber Rattler that he killed while



Meshach was named after the Bible character who, along with Shadrach and Abednego, faced trial by fire when thrown into the flaming furnace.

Not unlike the three who strode from the furnace, Browning was tempered by the adversity dealt him by the wild and untamed land. His prowess as a hunter made him a legend in his day and his descendants are now as legion as offspring of the eleven children he fathered.

Even though Browning rarely ranged beyond the counties of Allegany and Garrett in

since otherwise the hunting tales and events of his many years would have been lost.

This biography is largely accounts of adventures and misadventures while hunting. Most amazing is the detail given to seemingly every outing in search of game that Browning made in nearly a half-century.

During his years of hunting, he bagged nearly 2000 deer, 300 bears, many wolves, panthers and other game. His memory must have remained vivid in his later years since he



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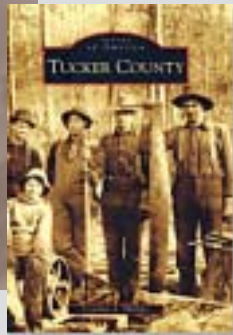
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## Canaan

superb piece of fresh-peeled bark, with which Mr. Jones was duly covered. "Look here, gentlemen," said he, triumphantly, "you may now go to grass with your shed. I wouldn't change places with the man in the middle." The gentlemen replied with a shout of laughter and a storm of jokes. "He's fairly embarked in it!" cried one. "Looks more like he was embalmed," cried another.

over, and a deep sleep fell upon them all—which lasted until the wood-robin warbled a reveille on the following morning. When they awoke it was still raining, and from all appearances has been raining all night. A thin vapory smoke rose from the extinguished embers, and all nature was dripping.

"By the beard of the Prophet!" exclaimed Porte Crayon as he combed the

heard from you since night before last. You must be getting better."

"Thank you, I feel much better, and will hereafter be a believer in the water cure."

"Look here," said X., sticking his heels into the air, while a stream poured from each boot.

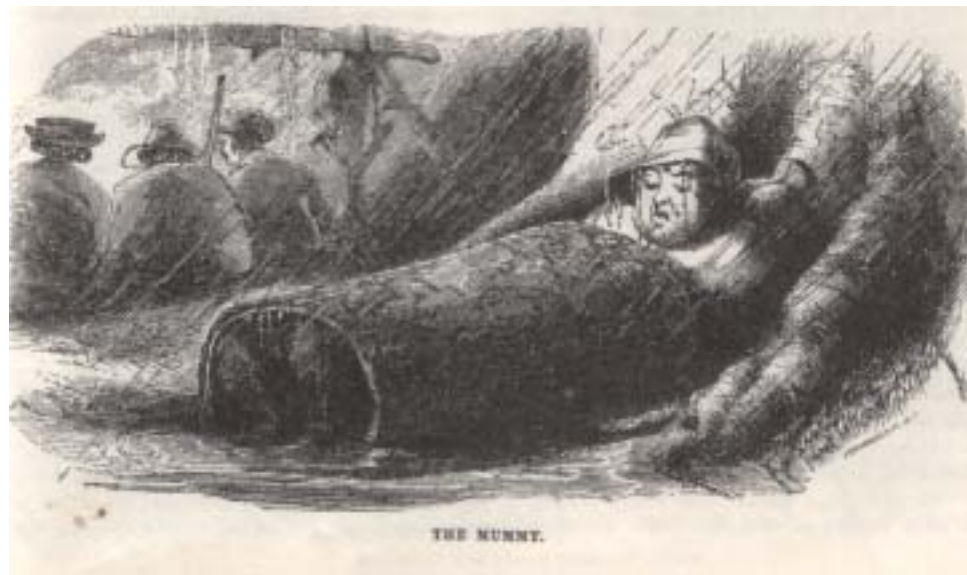
"Bless my soul!" quoth Mr. Penn empathically, as he gathered up his legs and arms like separate pieces of lumber, and

"Hark from the tombs—the mummy desires to be uncased."

"No—stand back. I don't want any of your aid—Conway, good fellow, remove this confounded bark. Gently—there—now help me to bend my legs—oh!—ah!—whew!—thank you—let go now, I think I can stand alone;" and, after sundry efforts, Mr. Jones recovered the use of his legs sufficiently to carry him to breakfast, where, by a free use of fried middling and hot coffee, he lubricated his limbs into their usual condition of activity.

A council of war decided that the army was not in condition to move that day, and that they should remain under cover, and repose while such as felt disposed should go out as scouts to explore thoroughly the surrounding country. Conway's talents were again called in requisition to extend and improve the comfort of their quarters. A pack of cards was introduced and the day passed on careless jollity. During the forenoon, Porte Crayon accompanied by Powell went out to search for the Cheat River, but after walking in idle circles for two hours, and becoming entangled in laurel-brake, they were glad to get back to camp. Dindon, Thornhill, and Powell were more successful, and returned late in the evening with the report that they had found the Cheat, and had wounded an otter. The news gave great satisfaction, but their description of the stream differed so widely from the supposed location and size of that river, that the accuracy of the report was doubled by Mr. Penn and others who had been studying the geography of the country. —

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



"A mummy! Or a mud-turtle lying on his back—Pharaoh the Fat! I'd like to see Gliddon unroll him before the Historical Society of Massachusetts." "Rail on from your mud-hole, my good fellows; but take my advice, and reserve your wit, for it will require more than you have got among you to keep yourselves dry tonight. I am entirely impervious either to jokes or rain; good-night." Unfortunately for Mr. Jones's comfort the wind changed, and the rain poured upon him in rivets; and shortly afterward groans and lamentations were heard in the direction of the mummy. "It seems to be in pain; some one had better look after it," said X. Conway good-naturedly took a chunk of tire and went to Mr. Jones's assistance. It turned out that the acrid sap from the hemlock-bark had got into his eye; but it was soon

scrutinized the covering of the shed; "there must be a leak in this roof; the water has been dribbling into my left ear, until it is so full I can't hear." Just then a drop took him in the eye. "There! Blast the thing, I was sure of it!"

"The hydrostatic bed," said Mr. Smith, "is preferable to any other for an invalid."

"Well done, Smith, this is the first time we've

cried a sepulchral voice.



## Mechach

digging ginseng and kept its rattle in a box with cuff links and tie clasps.

While growing up, "Sonny" had been enthralled by tales of Browning's often amazing feats of bringing down game. He was anxious to read Browning's book and checked it out of the University Library. When I was drifting off to sleep, he would wake me and read one of the seemingly endless hunting exploits.

As the years went by, I wondered what had followed "Sonny's" college years and remembered he was in the Army R.O.T.C. I speculated he had become an officer and gotten caught up in the

whirlwind of Southeast Asia. I learned some years after his death that he had been killed in Vietnam.

"Sonny's" death, along with countless others, meant that we would continue to enjoy the freedoms of America. The great task that is ours is working diligently to insure that the beauty and bounty of our state and nation are preserved for future generations.

Intriguing is the influence of a person upon our lives such as "Sonny" who was a person of excitement, energy and humor. He not only acquainted me with Mechach Browning, but remains one of my heroes.

*To order a reprint of "Forty-Four Years of the Life of a Hunter" by Meshach Browning, contact: Appalachian Background, 4167 Maryland Highway, Oakland MD 21550. Phone 301-334-4334 or email: irowe@mail2.gcn.net*

## First of all

I'd like to thank the people who responded to my letter in the last issue of *Blackwater Roots*. I truly appreciate the information you've passed on and wish to thank you all publicly for your time in sharing your knowledge with me.

Now, I would like to share with you the stories of my journey – my passage – to my own past in hopes that others who are searching will find maybe some bits of information and perhaps some inspiration as well. This has been a labor of love for me and a journey I would not hesitate to take again. If I could change only one thing, it would have been to embark on it earlier in my life.

There are many who would say to leave the past behind, to let what is past stay in the past, to forget about it and move on. I can agree with only the second part of that advice. Yes, we all need to move on with our lives. But consider that we can't ever leave the past behind really. We use it every day, whenever we follow the traditions of the holidays like Thanksgiving, Veterans Day, Christmas. In those holidays the past reaches out to us and teaches us something about our common history. So why not embrace a family history in the same way? We can learn from and cherish that as well as any favored holiday or celebration. So, this is the story of the search for my own past, in hopes of finding cherished memories and perhaps once in a while, some inspiration and lessons passed on by my own ancestors.

While growing up, my Aunt Antoinette would tell me stories about her childhood in Coketon,

Tucker County, West Virginia. Of course, in my youth these stories seemed to echo the stories told to many children by their parents ... "I had to walk 20 miles to school through the snow, uphill, both ways!" Little did I know that in this particular case, perhaps this weren't so far from the truth after all!

As grade school led to high school, and then to marriage and children, I gave little thought to my family history. The business, or "busy-ness", of life pushed away all other thoughts of looking into my own past. Instead I concentrated on the future, keeping a home and raising a family, of "moving on." But always present in the back of my mind were the questions that perhaps all of us have



at one time or another. Who am I? Where did I come from? How did I get here?

As I got older the questions became more persistent and I began to act upon them in hopes of finding answers. I started off knowing only the very basics. Where my aunt (and her brother - my father) grew up, that my grandfather was a coal miner who came from Lithuania, and that he had many children. I knew from the stories that were

## Passages of the Past

By Susan Hinkle  
*pictured on right*

told to me of some of the routine parts of my aunt's life growing up — of raising chickens and following the ring of a certain cowbell to bring the milk cow home from the hillside. I had the memory of traveling once to Coketon as a child. There was little else.

My husband, who was fortunate enough to have had a genealogist for a grandfather, had a book to look into to find his ancestors along with letters and other writings and even a family tree in a frame. I, on the other hand, knew very little of mine except for those bits and pieces I've already told you about. My

husband lovingly encouraged my curiosity and so the passage began.

In the mid 1970s we made our first trip to West Virginia from Cleveland where we were living at the time. We stayed overnight in Fairmont, and then drove on to Thomas. Our first trips were probably more as tourists than seekers of information, but what we learned as we ventured around the county on the main and the back roads helped me understand in

some small way where my grandfather and grandmother settled. I didn't even know his true last name at the time. I questioned how I would ever find information on someone whose name I didn't even know for sure. What I did have was a name that used to be pronounced to me (How-Re-Lee-Us) and another name (Casimiris). I didn't even know how that name fit into the puzzle. I knew that my grand-mother was buried somewhere near Thomas but had no idea where or even when she died. At that time the pieces of the puzzle seemed far apart that it seemed impossible to ever put them together again.

After a conversation with my aunt Susie one afternoon, I gathered another piece of information, seemingly inconsequential in the scheme of things, but one that would prove invaluable to me later on. I found out when my grandmother passed away. Now I had a date, a phonetic last name and a place. With that knowledge in hand, the next journey we made to the county had us looking for the Catholic cemeteries in the area. We stopped at DePollo's store and were met with a true warmth of spirit that made us feel very welcome. Mr. DePollo took an interest in my story and gave generously of his time. He helped us find the telephone number to the church. Unfortunately there was no answer at



that time. So he next called down the street inquiring as to where the mayor was in his routine of visiting the businesses of the town. As it turned out, the mayor was just down the street and was nearing the store. While waiting, we passed the time in conversation about Thomas and Coketon, and its history. Mr. DePollo shared his knowledge freely with us and his stories began to carve out in my mind what life may have been like for my grandparents, father, aunts and uncle. We passed the time in pleasant conversation and laughter. We had truly met a gentleman among gentlemen.

The mayor eventually came in, we were introduced. Upon hearing our story, he too took up an interest. But instead of just giving us directions to the cemetery the mayor kindly offered to show us the way. Not wanting to take time away from his daily routine we at first declined, but he wouldn't hear of it! We followed him as he drove up to Mt. Calvary Cemetery and armed with a "possible" last name

(Aurelius) and date of death, he spent part of his afternoon freely with us, searching among the headstones. Unfortunately for us it was drawing down dark quickly and we had end the search prematurely and travel back home. We didn't find my grandmother's burial place that day, but on our next trip to the cemetery we were able to find it. The headstone was carved in Lithuanian with yet another spelling of the family last name on it, but it was the first solid and tangible piece of my family puzzle. I touched the ground lightly, saying a prayer, grieving over a lady who I never had the chance to meet and silently pondering the many questions in my head. I rested my hand on the stone and asked myself who was she? What was she like? What did she experience?

The leaves on the hillside were swirling around, mixing with my thoughts. The passage to my own past had been set in motion there, in that cemetery on that cool autumn afternoon.

**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 request(s) to our Charleston office or call 1-877-WVA-LAND.**

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