

ROSCOE

This is a story about a man named Roscoe, Roscoe W. Smith, who lived in an old blue school bus along the side of Fire Tower Road in Yancey County, North Carolina. I made his acquaintance during visits to my wife's cousin's summer home in the fall of 1980, 1982 and 1986. My wife's cousin, John Bryans, is a professional watercolor artist in Arlington, Virginia, and for many years taught at a school, "Painting in the Mountains", just outside Burnsville, North Carolina during the summer and fall. After his courses were over, he drove through the mountains painting pictures of the many interesting buildings and beautiful mountain scenery of the area. It was then that my wife made me drive her down there so she could go off painting with her cousin leaving me behind to fend for myself.

To get there from Washington, D.C., one has to drive 400 miles down Interstate 81 to Johnson City, Tennessee, then to Unicoi where you turn on a road which takes you along the side of Roan Mountain through Buladean and Red Hill; then along the Toe River; and finally over Green Mountain into Burnsville, North Carolina, the county seat of Yancey County, referred to as being back of Mount Mitchell. Then you have to climb back up Green Mountain this time on Mitchell Branch Road taking a right just outside of town onto steep gravel Fire Tower Road past a big old blue school bus parked by the side of the road with rocks under its wheels, and then a left onto an even steeper rutted dirt road leading to a flat spot just big enough for her cousin's beat up old station wagon and my pick-up truck.

And then I have to carry our luggage and all her painting stuff along a narrow dirt driveway across a creek and a row of stacked firewood to her cousin's mountain cabin -- well really a two-story concrete block house pushed into the side of the hill. The homemade plank entrance door is defined by Dutchman's pipe vine nailed around a rough sawn cherry doorframe. An angular crotch of a tree limb hangs on the door for a doorknocker. Inside, a staircase angles up a corner to the second floor opening into her cousin's studio. Double glass doors open onto a porch, level with the top of the trees with bird feeders strategically placed for entertainment. Just beyond, another set of glass doors opens into a rustic living room with a large stone fireplace and a wall of resurrected old church windows facing the beautiful valley below.

This mountain dwelling could only have been built by my wife's artist cousin and Roscoe, a mountain man retired from the North Carolina State Forestry. He lived in the old blue school bus, a bit of folk art in itself. It hadn't been moved in years and was covered with gray dust, stirred up by cars as they passed by on the gravel road. Roscoe had erected a little fence along the road near

the bus with "Roscoe W. Smith" spelled out on it in Dutchman's pipe vine. He kept his wood under the bus where it would stay dry and his little dog Polly chained to the back of the bus so she wouldn't get onto the road. Polly wasn't much of a watchdog because when Roscoe was away from the bus Polly wouldn't make a sound. But when Roscoe was around and someone approached, Polly barked furiously not to guard the bus or Roscoe but to gain the visitor's attention.

Inside, Roscoe had removed seats to make room for a little pot bellied stove and rudimentary kitchen. He had placed two of them facing each other on either side of a table, and arranged others to make a bed. Who knows where he got the old mattress he laid on top of them! He stoked his stove by lifting a trap door in the floor, reaching down and picking up the wood he had shoved under the bus. The stove's chimney pipe angled out through one of the bus windows. The kitchen was a shelf and sink with a five-gallon water can perched on a narrow shelf above the sink. A siphon hose dangled out of its top. The sink drained out a pipe sticking through a hole in the side of the bus spilling his gray water over the side of the hill.

He didn't have electricity - considered it "Too expensive!"

It seems that a few years earlier a local church group decided Roscoe needed electricity and placed an order with the Yancey County Rural Electric Cooperative to hookup electricity to his bus. One of the members wired a couple of ceramic light sockets on the ceiling and an outlet on the dashboard, and they gave him a radio.

Roscoe enjoyed his new electric lights and bragged about his radio, "That didn't run down" until one day the postman delivered an envelope from the Electric Coop containing a bill for the hookup and his first month's electricity. The church group had instructed the Electric Coop to send the bill to them, but someone at the Coop mistakenly sent it to Roscoe. And when he opened it, he was mortified!! It was \$85, almost twice his monthly retirement check. He couldn't begin to pay it! He stormed down to the Electric Coop office with bill clutched in hand, threw it on the counter and told them, "Take that there electricity out. I don't need no expensive thing like that." And before the church group learned of the mistake, the Electric Coop had removed the hookup and refused to put it back because electricity was not safe in Roscoe's bus.

So Roscoe lived without electricity, but got along just fine with his kerosene lantern and flashlight. But he seldom used either so in the darkness of night and with the windows covered with dust; it was impossible to tell if he was home.

While he had removed and rearranged passenger seats, he didn't touch the driver seat. In the evening, and who knows how long into

the night, he would sit there keeping track of who was going up and down the mountain. He always knew who was at home up the mountain and who was down -- and who had gone up that didn't belong there.

Roscoe was Fire Tower Road's self-appointed watchman and the residents that lived up the mountain valued his service. They looked out for Roscoe by buying wood he sold from the pile he kept in the field across the road from the bus and bringing him useful gifts like a flashlight, transistor radio, batteries, or a home cooked meal. Roscoe said that at Thanksgiving and Christmas he was the best fed man in Yancey County -- "Why one November I had twelve invitations to Thanksgiving dinner, but didn't accept any because I didn't want to hurt nobody's feelings by going to just one." So people stopped trying and delivered his dinners to the blue bus.

The first time my wife hauled me down there, I heard the grinding and rattling of a truck climbing the Fire Tower Road and asked, "What's that?" John casually replied, "Oh, that's just Roscoe going up the mountain. He says he sleeps better up there."

The next morning I heard a rattling and crashing coming down the road, looked out and saw an ancient flat bed truck with a shack on its bed bouncing and flopping around. The shack had "Woo! Woo!" painted in big bright red letters on its sides, and a bumper sticker proclaiming -- "This vehicle stops for pretty girls". Again, I asked, "What's that?" and again John casually replied, "Oh, that's just Roscoe coming down."

Every evening Roscoe drove his rig up the mountain and slept at the foot of the fire tower he had manned for many years, and every morning after a good night's sleep he came bumping, crashing and rattling back down, and parked it in front of his old blue bus.

We stayed only a day on that first visit, but left with memories of the beautiful mountains and curious about Roscoe.

The next time we went down in the fall to enjoy the brilliant colors and stay a few days. As we climbed up the gravel road to John's house and passed Roscoe's blue bus, I noticed that his flat bed truck was parked in front of the old blue bus, and it too had rocks under its wheels.

The next morning my wife announced that she and John were going off in the mountains to paint for the day and I wasn't invited to go along. John said he had asked Roscoe to put in a water line from the spring up the hill, and maybe I could entertain myself by helping him. Well, I can dig a ditch so why not, but would Roscoe put up with me? John broached the subject. Roscoe said, "He'd try, but couldn't guarantee water would flow through a pipe worked on by a city guy."

Roscoe showed me where the pipe was to go and handed me a mattock. He scarpd out the first six inches and I followed digging down another six inches or so. Occasionally, he would come around behind and straighten up the bottom to be sure we were at least a foot below ground and that the pipe would have the proper lie.

We didn't talk much, but once he pointed to a plant and told me not to put dirt on it, as it was "sang" and after a couple of years he could come back and, "Gether it, if someone else didn't discover it first. Won't tell anyone, will you?" I assured him I would keep the secret, but threatened to dig it up it myself next time down.

At noon we sat in the woods and ate the white Wonder Bread, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, Roscoe's favorite, which Barbara had made for us. We hadn't stopped all morning and I was thirsty. Thought Roscoe probably was too, and offered to get a couple of beers from the house, whereupon he emphatically replied, "Alcohol nor drugs shall never pass my lips!" This took me aback and I instinctively replied, "What?" And again he recited, "Alcohol nor drugs shall never pass my lips!" Well so much for enjoying a beer on a warm fall day. I had been sure that Roscoe was some sort of a wino drinking in his bus all night that I didn't hesitate to offer him a beer, only to discover that he was a strict southern teetotaler. So I went in the house and retrieved the bottle of water that Barbara had put in the refrigerator for us.

We finished the trench by mid-afternoon, laid the pipe, connected it to the system, and had the water back on by the time John and Barbara returned.

As John paid Roscoe for his day's work, Roscoe told him, "That city guy was o.k. - Worked right along and agreed to keep his secret." I was pleased that Roscoe had accepted me, but irritated that he mentioned the secret because the next few days Barbara and John pestered me for it. I never told and I guess Roscoe dug it up, because the next time down I couldn't find that ginseng.

The next day Barbara and her cousin went off again, again leaving me with Roscoe. We back filled the trench and the job was done before noon, and we retired down to the bench across the road from his bus. I asked Roscoe why he had put rocks under the wheels of his truck. He said one day on his way up to the fire tower the engine blew, he backed it down to where he could turn it around, then coasted it down the mountain, and pulled off the road in front of his blue bus and put the rocks under the wheels to keep it from rolling down the mountain. "Been trying to fix the engine, but might have to find a junkyard that'll tow it away for free."

I asked how he was getting around, and he proudly showed me a motor scooter he had bought for \$25. Said he could get around on

it real good and hardly used any gas. Why it could even take him half way up the mountain, but it wouldn't go clear up to the fire tower because the road up to there was too steep. If it could, he might sleep up on the mountain again.

Said he had to keep it off the highway though.

It seems he didn't register the scooter and one day was riding it out on the highway. A state trooper noticed it didn't have a tag and stopped him. When the trooper discovered that Roscoe hadn't registered the scooter, he asked to see his motorcycle license and discovered he didn't have that either. So the trooper took him to the local magistrate in Burnsville. The magistrate knew Roscoe, told the trooper that since Roscoe was obviously guilty, he could go on to Spruce Pine and the judge would take care of it. As soon as the trooper left, the magistrate voided the citations. Roscoe couldn't pay them anyway and the magistrate didn't want to send him to jail. Then he told Roscoe to try to get the licenses, but if he didn't, not to take the motor scooter out on the highway where those troopers from Spruce Pine might see him. Trouble was that Roscoe didn't have enough money to buy insurance so he couldn't get it registered so he just never took it out on the highway anymore, at least, not when a state trooper might be around.

After awhile I told Roscoe I thought I would hike up the mountain. He said he hadn't been up for awhile and might go along. So we moseyed up along the gravel road until we came to a wooden plank nailed to a tree with "Fire Tower" painted on it in red letters with an arrow pointing up a narrow gravel road. We turned up the road, and as we walked I asked Roscoe about animals that scurried off into the underbrush or plants I didn't recognize. He always knew what they were, showed me where a bear had spent the winter, and checked the condition of springs along the way telling me stories of residents secretly tapping into neighbors' springs when theirs dried up. About a half mile up, a driveway went into the last house on the mountain. The road made a sharp left turn and turned into two parallel dirt tracks made by the wheels of Forestry trucks.

We walked along the dirt trails eventually reaching the ridge overlooking a steep western slope with skeletons of a few old cars scattered down the side rusting into the ground. Roscoe commented, "Folk didn't need to push their old cars over the side of mountains no more because some junk yards took old cars."

When we got to the top, called Phillips Knob, he pointed to four charred stone piers, which supported the cabin he and his mother used to live in and told of how he liked "livin' on top of the mountain." He could cut all the wood he needed with no trouble at all, and "No one ever paid him no mind." He could sit up in

that fire tower all day and into the night just lookin' out over the mountains, "Had the prettiest sight in all of North Carolina." We climbed up the tower and stood below the now locked trap door to the observation booth. He pointed to Roan Mountain and Mount Mitchell and told me how he had helped build fire roads and how he used to gather rhododendron seeds and pinecones from Roan Mountain for the Forestry nursery. Then told stories about fires he had spotted, and how he helped fight them. And then with a sorrowful countenance told me about the fire in the cabin, which forced them to move to town. He said he reckoned it didn't agree with his mother much as she died shortly afterwards.

On the way down, he walked off the road apiece and kicked the ground, dislodging some rough polyhedral shaped stones saying, "Them's garnets". I picked up a few and examined them, and sure enough they were garnets in the rough. I put a dozen or so in my pocket. When I showed them to John that evening he exclaimed, "Garnets? I heard there were garnets up there, but Roscoe never showed me where they were!" And I never ran into anyone else that Roscoe had ever told about the garnets. Later I went back up and gathered a couple of coffee cans full, and traded some for "sang", but that is yet another story.

That evening as we sat by the fire in the living room fireplace, John told us about once when Roscoe was up on the mountain alone cutting down a tree, the tree fell prematurely, pinning Roscoe's leg under it. In time, he was able to free himself and get to the road where a passerby found him and took him to the small local hospital. When the nurse began cutting up the side of Roscoe's bib overalls so the doctor could examine his leg, Roscoe was horrified and yelled, "Ain't no woman gonna cut my pants off." Needless to say the nurse won, and Roscoe's mortal embarrassment was worse than the pain from his broken leg.

After hashing over family stories for a while, we turned in. Since Barbara and John had finished painting, I was allowed to go with them for the next couple of days. John drove us over beautiful mountains and through beautiful valleys. Two days later we left to return home, waving goodbye to Roscoe as we rumbled down the mountain and passed him sitting on his bench by his woodpile across from his blue bus.

A few years later Barbara dragged me down there again. As I drove up Fire Tower Road I saw Roscoe sitting on the bench next to his woodpile across the road from his blue bus just like he hadn't moved all the time we were gone. John said he had told Roscoe we were coming down and he knew Roscoe was just sitting there waiting for us to arrive.

The next morning I walked down to see Roscoe. He was sitting on his bench whittling and didn't say much. I sat down next to him

and after a spell asked him what he was whittling. "A duck head", he replied asking if I liked it. I said it was real nice adding that I was thinking of going up the mountain. He gave me his duck head, said he hadn't been up the mountain for some time and asked if I minded if he came along. That being what I wanted all along, I agreed and we started up.

On the way up Roscoe stopped at a driveway sporting "No trespassing" signs leading to two burned out houses. I asked him what happened. He said the owner was from some place up north. People around here didn't like him much and didn't much care to work for him. One day when the man was up north, his house caught fire, and by the time the fire department got up here, the fire was burning so bad they didn't have enough water to put it out. People came from all over, but most they could do is just stand around and watch - "Couldn't go on property with 'No Trespassing' signs, you know." He said, "The guy got money from the insurance company for the first house and built the second, but it caught on fire and burnt too. Now he hears that the insurance company won't pay because they think he set the fires himself."

This story reveals a little of how mountain folk can behave sometimes, and the people of Fire Tower Road took great pains not to offend Roscoe lest he refuse to work for them. He was a good worker, strong, honest, always knew how to do those hard rough outside jobs that always seem to turn up around mountain property. But despite Roscoe's rough appearance, he was sensitive and didn't take much to criticism. Let me tell you an incident.

John's next-door neighbor, Harold, had a concrete block chimney on the side of his rustic log house and decided he wanted to cover it with stone. He asked Roscoe if he would get him some that he could cement up around the chimney. The very next day Roscoe showed up with his truck piled high with stones and unloaded them next to the chimney. The stones were big, much too big for Harold to handle, and he asked Roscoe to take them back and get some smaller ones. But to Roscoe they were just right, and he just quietly left and didn't return. Harold waited and waited, but Roscoe didn't come back. Finally, Harold asked John if he would ask Roscoe when he was coming back. John agreed, adding that he couldn't guarantee results.

The next time John saw Roscoe he said, "You know, Harold really needs stone to finish that chimney." Roscoe just looked John straight in the eye and said, "You tell Harold them stones ain't ripe yet." And Harold never did get any more stones, at least from Roscoe, and had to hire a stonemason to finish the job.

After inspecting the burned out house foundations, we continued up the mountain. When we got to the ridge, Roscoe pointed over it telling me not to go down there, as marihuana

plants were growing down there and the men that looked after it carried guns - "Best to stay away from there." Again, Roscoe lamented the loss of his cabin as well as his flat bed truck - "Sure would like to sleep on the top of the mountain again."

I asked if he had ever lived in the city. He said he lived in town for a while after his mother died, but he didn't like it. People ignored him and he didn't have anything to do. One day when he was walking through the junkyard he spied an old blue school bus. He got its engine to run so he bought it and drove it up here. He didn't know how good the engine was so only drove it to town to pick up his Forestry retirement check; buy food, gas and kerosene; and pick out new clothes at the "Give away store." To him it cost too much to wash clothes at the Laundromat so he just stuffed his dirty clothes in cracks and corners of his old blue bus and picked out new ones at the "Give away store".

But one day on the way up Fire Tower Road the engine blew. He backed it down to where he could turn it around, and then coasted the rest of the way down the mountain. When he got near to where the gravel joined the black top, he pulled it off to the side of the road, because he figured that if he took it on the black top road the County might tow it away. The engine was ruined so he just shoved rocks under the wheels and took up livin' there. Afterwards he found the old flat bed truck in the same junkyard, but that engine blew too.

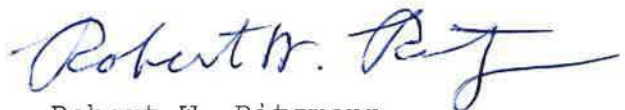
One day, the Highway Department decided to black top Fire Tower Road. When the highway supervisor saw Roscoe's bus, he said it was on the right of way and had to go. So they hitched it to a bulldozer and towed and pushed it into a little hollow in Mrs. Briggs' woods - out of sight. On nice days Roscoe sat on his bench beside the road selling wood and even built a shack next to the wood pile, but he could no longer sit in the driver's seat of his blue bus and watch the cars go up and down Fire Tower Road keeping track of who was up and who was down - and who was up that didn't belong there. Someone brought him a little battery operated television set to occupy his mind while he sat in his blue bus back in the woods. But alas, the next Christmas, a friend walked into the woods to the old blue bus carrying Roscoe a hot sumptuous Christmas dinner and found him slumped over his kerosene stove, which he was attempting to refill, cold and stiff - dead!

Now Roscoe didn't own a suit, and it seems he had only owned one in his entire life. His mother saw to it that he got through high school and when he was about to graduate he was so proud that he took all the money he had been saving and bought a new suit and shirt to graduate in. Got all cleaned up, put on the shirt and suit, and went off to his graduation. But as he walked up to the high school auditorium, his fellow students laughed at him. He was all dressed up, but wasn't wearing shoes. Just hadn't occurred to

him that he needed any. He was so put down by their laughter that he ran from the auditorium, tore off his suit, threw it in the trash, and never put one on again. The high school principal had to deliver his diploma to his house.

Roscoe's only possessions when he died were his broken down old bus full of dirty clothes tucked in all its cracks and corners, and a motor scooter -- with a blown engine. So the people of Fire Tower Road took up a collection bought him a suit, shirt, and casket; the undertaker donated his services; the local florist, flowers; and the Marietta Atkins Cemetery, a burial plot. And Burnsville gave Roscoe one of the best send off's ever seen in Yancey County.

The people in Burnsville say that while Roscoe is no longer able to go up the mountain, he is now in a place higher than Phillips Knob.



Robert W. Ritzmann
August 12, 2001

Postscript:

Roscoe's innate understanding of the mountains, his wiry muscular body, and his willingness to help those who respected his dignity and rugged, simple, free life style made him a friend of all. His friends noticed that he was beginning to show signs of age and he died in December of 1997, slightly over 70 years of age.

Except for treatment of his broken leg, no one is aware that he ever went to a doctor and an autopsy wasn't done. Perhaps he died from a heart attack, from asphyxiation caused by using the kerosene stove that he probably found in his enclosed bus, or just from the loneliness of living back in the hollow where he couldn't see or be seen from the road.

On our visit in the fall of 1998 and I walked into the hollow to the blue bus. Roscoe's old motor scooter laid upside down as though Roscoe was trying to get it to run. A little woodpile and five gallon can laid nearby. The back door of the blue bus stood open and I peered in. The inside was in shambles. Animals had dug through everything over the last nine months, rummaging around for food and building nests in Roscoe's abandoned clothes. I didn't go in for fear of catching fleas, and just quietly left saying a little prayer for Roscoe.



RWR