

## Adventures with Roscoe

First of all, Roscoe Smith was my friend. Although we came from vastly different backgrounds we had many things in common. I don't remember the first time we met; one of the first encounters I do remember was a time when Everett, my associate, asked Roscoe to bring some rhododendron plants for the new art studio which was being built on the mountain. One never knew when Roscoe might appear, so it wasn't too surprising to have him show up on a rainy Sunday morning while Everett and I were having breakfast. His first words: "Where dy'all want them laurel plants?" (laurel is what mountain folks call rhododendron). Anyhow, his truck was full, so we had no choice but to go and plant them in the rain. It must have been the right time because most of those plants are still flourishing these thirty years later.

Roscoe lived for many years in an old school bus parked permanently by the side of the road leading up Green Mountain to the fire observation tower at the top. His principal means of transportation was two ancient trucks which he parked in front of the school bus. Roscoe had spent several years as a state forest service employee; one of his duties was to man the fire tower in periods when fires were most likely to occur. During these times he and his mother resided in a tiny cabin in the shadow of the fire tower. The concrete posts on which it stood are still there. Unfortunately the cabin burned to the ground one winter, so thereafter he and his mother lived in town until she died. The seasons spent on the mountaintop must have been truly wonderful for Roscoe.

I will always remember one cold winter day when Everett and I were in Burnsville on painting class business. Roscoe took us up to the top of the fire tower. The wind was blowing such a gale that I really wondered if the small glassed-in enclosure would hold tight to its support. Though no longer in use, the fire tower still stands sturdily atop of Green Mountain. It's still possible to get a magnificent view by climbing the stairs as high as possible.

### The Travelling Cabin

One of his trucks Roscoe fitted with a "cabin" in the truck bed. Nightly he would drive up the mountain to sleep on top. At other times when he was running an errand of one kind or another, the "cabin" swayed precariously from side to side. It was an adventure to drive up or down the mountain behind this contraption. It finally did collapse at a time when no one was following in a car. After that Roscoe slept in his old school bus. Not long after he had acquired the bus I was honored to be invited inside. He had adapted the interior rather cleverly by removing some of the seats. Two of them he had placed facing each other on either side of a table, while others he had arranged to make a bed. One of our art students donated some of her watercolors which he used tastefully as window blinds on the side of the bus facing the road. Later on Roscoe added a small porch to the back end

of the bus with a minute deck behind that. Here he installed a child's wading pool which I never saw him use. Water came directly from the stream beside the bus.

Roscoe had found the bus in a junk yard, managed to get the motor running, and was able somehow to keep it operating until he arrived at its final position on Fire Tower road. Everyone, Roscoe included, realized that the bus was parked on the road right of way, but no one objected strenuously, so there the bus stayed. I always felt it was an advantage to have it there since Roscoe always knew who was coming and going on the mountain.

### The Electric Age

Some time after Roscoe moved into the bus a local church group decided it would be nice for him to have electric light, so they arranged with the power company to run a line from a nearby pole to the bus, with the understanding that the church group would foot the bill. Roscoe enjoyed this amenity for several weeks before the bill for installation was mistakenly sent to him. Roscoe was astounded to receive the bill, and refused to pay it. This misunderstanding was never resolved to Roscoe's satisfaction. Thus ended his brief "electric age." Heat in the winter was provided by a small wood stove with a pipe that went out one of the bus windows. "It's just as toasty as it can be in winter," he told me. Later Roscoe progressed to a small kerosene stove which eventually led to his demise.

Though Roscoe's bus has been gone from the roadside for many years, several hemlock trees and a dogwood are thriving where the bus was once parked--remnant of a "garden" he planted there.

All of his clothes Roscoe bought at a thrift shop in town. Since he considered the laundromat too expensive, he simply purchased a new set of clothes with great frequency. He was very proud that he had been able to purchase his raiment at such rock bottom prices. The old clothes were never thrown away, they simply began to take up more and more space inside the bus.

Judy Curtis, who befriended Roscoe on many occasions, remembers that one of the things Roscoe always did was to show her anything new he had acquired--i.e. new tires for his truck. "He would always show me each of the four tires saying, "Lookie here," to each and every one. He did the same thing once when a relative had given him four very large brown bags full of groceries. He said, "Lookie here," to each can of soup or stew, etc., etc. (it took a full hour for me to marvel at his gold mine of goodies)."

The house on Mitchell Branch in which Roscoe and his mother lived had running water--all the time. A pipe inserted through the kitchen wall provided the water brought from a nearby spring. Of course, the bathroom facilities did not have the benefit of running water.

## A Debacle

Roscoe finished high school, and from all accounts was a bright student. When graduation time arrived, Roscoe wanted to put up a good appearance, so he bought himself a suit, the first he had ever owned. But his money did not go far enough to include a pair of shoes. When Roscoe appeared barefoot for the ceremony, the other students began to laugh at him. He left without receiving his diploma. I understand that it was later delivered to him at home.

Though his formal education was not extensive, he had great curiosity about the outside world; he was constantly asking questions about Washington, D.C. Among his most prized possessions were a few old *National Geographic* magazines which someone had given him. He had acquired a wide self-education about the natural world around him although he seemed to know the names of but a few plants, trees and animals.

When someone gave him a little battery operated TV set, Roscoe would hail passersby to tell them every tidbit of news- verbatim- as though he was the only one in the world who knew any of it.

## Nature Lore

Roscoe's nature lore included many things. One I remember was that every August when the katydids were singing, he'd say, "When the katydids start to sing, it'll be 40 days to frost." And he was usually right. Roscoe also had a theory, which I believe may have some scientific basis, in that he felt that springs ran faster at night than in the day.

One thing he did know about was "sang," the mountain pronunciation for ginseng, the root of which is in great demand, mostly in Asia, as a cure for many ills. People in the mountains make money by digging the roots and selling them. Once when Bob Ritzmann, my cousin Barbara's husband, was helping Roscoe dig the trench for the water line running to our house from a spring near the studio, Roscoe pointed out some "sang" to him, asking Bob to promise not to tell a soul where it was, a promise which Bob readily agreed to keep. Some years later, Roscoe confided in me that there was some "sang" growing not far from his bus. He asked me to keep quiet about it; he didn't volunteer to show me where it was.

One of Roscoe's favorite avocations was hunting for garnets in the rough. He often presented these to his friends. The garnets were leftovers from mica mining which at one time was a major cottage industry for local people. Then large pieces of mica called "books" could be found by digging shallow pits. The "books" were then taken to sheds where individual sheets of mica could be separated. These were in great demand in a number of industries. The discarded material from a larger mica

mine up the mountain where a shaft had been sunk was a prime source of garnets. Unfortunately, these gems had no monetary value since they had all been fractured, either by the forces of nature or as a result of mining operations. We still have a few on the window sill of the kitchen in our Burnsville house.

A feat that Roscoe accomplished early on for the benefit of the entire community was clearing the woods from portions of the mountain which had been logged. After the tree trunks which could be used for lumber had been removed the unusable tops of the trees, called "laps" in mountaineering, were left behind. Not only was this an unsightly mess but it was also a fire hazard. Roscoe tackled this mess with his chain saw. The result in addition to being pleasing to the eye turned out to be profitable for Roscoe since he was able to sell the cut wood for firewood.

### A Different Drummer

Some local people looked down on Roscoe because of his unique life style. Frankly, I think some of them were secretly jealous. To my way of thinking, he was leading an ideal existence, albeit one that would play havoc with civilization if everyone chose to live this way. All in all, he had many more friends than detractors. There were rumors that he was dishonest, but as long as I knew him I saw no evidence of this. On the contrary, I felt he always leaned over backward to be honest. Once he was doing some work on our house for me before there were any windows or doors in place except the front door. I had to run an errand, and unthinkingly locked the door. When I came back, Roscoe was nowhere in sight. I went down to the bus and asked why he wasn't working. "I ain't never goin' in nobody's house through no window," was his explanation. Bob Ritzmann told me that once when he and Roscoe were working together, Roscoe refused the offer of a beer, saying, "Liquor and drugs never pass my lips."

Roscoe only worked when and for whom he chose except for periods in the fall fire season when he manned the fire tower, and other times when he went to nearby Roan Mountain where he helped harvest cones from spruce trees. Seed from the cones is used in state nurseries to raise new spruce trees. Harvesting is accomplished by climbing the trees and shaking them vigorously, knocking the cones to the ground where they are gathered and placed in baskets. Gatherers are paid by the number of baskets they turn in. Roscoe told me he was able to increase the number of baskets he filled by climbing from tree to tree without descending to the ground. I never saw him in action, but have no doubt this was true.

In summer when there were many seasonal residents on the mountain, Roscoe was in great demand as he hired out by the hour as a handyman. He was exceedingly strong, though not a large man, and more than anything, loved to dig. He was always available to repair the many plastic water pipes, usually lying on top of the ground, which supplied houses on the mountain with water from nearby springs. The pipes tended to split periodically. Roscoe was adept at removing the broken



portions and splicing new pieces of pipe. One water pipe which was buried under the road often broke when a heavy truck passed over it. Roscoe loved to fix this one because it had to be dug up before it could be repaired.

### You Don't Owe Me Nothin'

Whenever Roscoe did work for anyone, the person who had hired him would ask, "How much do I owe you?" To which Roscoe's standard reply was, "You don't owe me nothin'." Of course, if he didn't receive some payment, it was unlikely that Roscoe would show much enthusiasm for working at that person's house again.

After this had happened to me several times, I asked my neighbor, Heston, how much he paid Roscoe. It turned out that several people on the mountain had conferred on this subject and had arrived at a "pay scale." It was based on an hourly figure but varied if the work included the use of his truck. There was also provision for particularly heavy work.

I can recall two occasions when I paid him more. One was the time when I needed to raise the height of my fireplace chimney higher over the roof line, a project which involved getting a piece of flue tile from the ground to the top of the chimney. I knew this was an impossible task for me, so I asked Roscoe if he thought he could get the tile up there. He grabbed the tile, went up the ladder and across the roof, and placed the tile where I needed it with no more effort than if the tile had been a small stone.

An incident that I had forgotten about until my daughter Stella reminded me of it, was the time when she was a relatively new driver. She started up the road, and just below Roscoe's bus, the back wheel of her car slid off the road into a shallow ditch. The ditch was just deep enough to hang up the car's back end. When Roscoe became aware of the problem, he simply went down there and lifted the car out of the ditch. Problem solved.

A number of years ago one of the posts holding up the south end of the house began to lean ominously. It was impossible to get a contractor even to come look at such a small project. I told Roscoe about the problem which he said he thought he could solve. I wasn't too certain he really could do anything about it, so I asked Everett, who said immediately that Roscoe was capable of handling the project. Roscoe dug down and removed a cement pad that the builder had put in. He dug further down and put in another, wider pad, and then built a cinderblock column on top of this up to ground level. Then he replaced the locust post. This repair lasted for a number of years until it finally became necessary to take the post out altogether and reach another solution, but Roscoe's project served very well for a good long time.

"Crag"

During his years as a state forest service employee Roscoe's boss was Craig English, the local forest service ranger. Craig and his wife, Juanita, became Roscoe's surrogate parents after Roscoe's mother died. Theirs was the only house Roscoe ever entered to have a meal or for any social occasion. Roscoe sometimes argued with "Crag," as Roscoe called him, but they always made up. After Craig retired he and Juanita moved to a town south of Asheville where they raised melons. Roscoe, by this time travelling by moped, went to their farm to help harvest the melons. Although Roscoe always kept himself very clean, Juanita insisted that he bathe in a tub. Though we on the mountain never knew for sure, everyone surmised that he performed his daily ablutions in the small stream that rose from a spring that originated under a huge rock face high on the mountain. It must have been rather brisk on a winter day.

Once a wayward bear made its way to the mountain, probably in search of blackberries which were then plentiful there. The mountain usually supported nothing larger than a fox or a raccoon. The bear did no harm, aside from startling people picking berries. One night when Roscoe was sleeping in his "cabin" on top of the mountain he said he was half awakened by a furry creature which had crawled in beside him. He said it was the bear, and it may well have been. The bear was eventually trapped and removed to a less populated area.

While I was walking through the woods on the lower part of our property one summer afternoon, I came across several old tires that I hadn't noticed before. When I asked Roscoe about them, he said he knew they were there because he was "saving" them. Another example of Roscoe's impromptu storage arrangements happened one winter when Everett felt sorry for him because the weather was unusually cold. Everett invited Roscoe to occupy a vacant apartment in the studio. To pass the time Roscoe decided to "overhaul" the engine of one of his trucks. He rigged up a large tripod in the studio parking lot and hoisted the engine out of the truck. There it stayed all winter long. Spring arrived and with it the impending start of a new season of art classes. Everett had a difficult time persuading Roscoe that it really was necessary to clear the parking lot.

### Innate Creativity

Roscoe often exhibited creative ability. When I was putting window frames on our house he came one day with cherry wood that he had cut into rough planks with his chain saw. These I was able to use as window and door frames in an area protected from the weather. Later that same summer Roscoe created a decorative fence near his bus residence. This included posts high enough to accommodate plastic hanging baskets someone had given him. These he filled with mountain plants. On the fence he placed the extremely pliant stems of Dutchman's pipe vine which grows plentifully on the mountain. With the vine he spelled out, "Roscoe W. Smith, Burnsville, North Carolina." I was able to photograph this project which, being exposed to the weather, did not survive long. Roscoe later brought me some pipe vine

stems (at my request) with which I made a decorative design around the door frame which I had made from his rough cherry boards. It still survives. Another project involving Dutchman's pipe vine did not survive. Roscoe brought me a piece of vine which had wrapped itself around a small tree. I had the bright idea of finding a branch of like thickness and wrapping the vine around it to form the base of a floor lamp. This lasted for a long time and was quite a conversation piece until I discovered one day that the wood base was infested with beetles. So the lamp is no more.

Other things which Roscoe did for me in the aesthetic line were stuccoing rooms in the downstairs of our house and bringing some oak planks he had found in the field near his bus. These were the mute remains of a once flourishing sawmill which had been in operation just off Fire Tower road when timber was being harvested from the mountain. These I fashioned into fake beams. He also brought me lots of stone, including some rather large pieces which I used for paving a front stoop and for stepping stones. Once Marshall, my son, was at home alone when Roscoe made one of his deliveries. He asked Marshall where I wanted the stones to which Marshall replied that he thought I wanted outside the back door on the second floor level. This required carrying all of them up to this area. I was astounded when I returned to find them there. They remain there to this day, although I managed with great effort to move them away from the back door when a deck was built. Roscoe dumped another of these large stones at the edge of the parking area some distance from the house. It has defied all my efforts to move it, and remains where it was pushed off the truck.

### The Plane Crash

A misadventure in which Roscoe was indirectly involved occurred one August afternoon. I happened to be teaching a portrait class in the studio when I heard the sound of a large number of vehicles headed up the mountain. One of these was an Army (or National Guard) ambulance, a rather unusual sight on Fire Tower Road. Soon enough we heard that there had been a plane crash on the mountain. It turned out that a small plane had disappeared somewhere in the vicinity and that a Civil Air Patrol plane was out searching for the downed aircraft. This plane's pilot noticed the glint of metal at a gap near the top of the mountain. When he banked the plane for a closer look, a downdraft caught the small craft, sending it crashing into the treetops. Fortunately, the pilot and his companion were not injured. The search plane did not fare so well. Later, it was discovered that the metal the pilot had seen was an old stove that Roscoe had "disposed of" for someone. There turned out to be a large assemblage of such items in Roscoe's private junkyard.

Roscoe accomplished marvelous things with his "comealong," a ratchet arrangement attached to a chain. Once there was a flash flood in the area that caused an old apple tree stump to become stuck in the uphill end of the metal culvert which carries a small stream under our driveway. Fortunately, the water dammed by the

stump receded just before going over the top of the fill, saving our driveway, but there was still the problem of the stuck stump. I told Roscoe about this, and shortly thereafter he arrived with the "comealong" in hand. One end of the chain he attached to a nearby tree; the other he wrapped around the stump. He started working the ratchet, and pretty soon the stump popped out like a cork.

While I was still trying to decide the best approach to the house site from the road Roscoe came with his chain saw one day and we cut our way through the underbrush and across the little stream. After several tries we determined the best route which would involve the least fill and be as direct as possible.

Again I needed Roscoe's help when a large tulip poplar near our driveway was partially uprooted by a freshet (they happen frequently) and was leaning menacingly over the driveway. Again Roscoe saved the day with the "comealong". This time he again fastened one end of the chain to a nearby stable tree and the other end around the leaning tree. He was able partially to bring the offending tree to an upright position. When he realized he had accomplished as much as he was going to, He climbed a ladder and fastened a sturdy plastic line to both trees. This arrangement served admirably until I realized, long after Roscoe was no longer with us, that the line was choking both trees. At this point it was necessary to have the leaning tree felled. Then it became firewood.

### Falling Rock

At the time grading was being done for our driveway the bulldozer operator clumsily pushed a rather large flat stone over the edge where it perched like Damocles' sword directly over the downhill end of the culvert under the driveway. The inevitable eventually happened, and the stone fell off, crushing the end of the culvert. Again, Roscoe to the rescue. He wrapped a chain around the rock and attached the other end to the back of his truck. He was able to pull the rock part way up the bank before the chain broke. However, the rock did clear the end of the culvert and has stayed in that position for many years now. Roscoe was able to force the end of the culvert open with a hefty crowbar.

Much earlier, before the fill for the driveway had been completed, I needed some extra culvert because it appeared the base of the fill would cover a larger area than anticipated. Metal culvert was not available in Burnsville then, so Roscoe suggested he drive to nearby Asheville with his truck. We'd pick up some pipe, I'd pay the bill, and he'd take the pipe back to Burnsville. All went well until we were on the return trip over a generously curved mountain road. As Roscoe's truck rounded one curve, a large section of culvert slipped off onto the pavement. Fortunately, I was following the truck in my car, and the road at that time was lightly travelled. We managed to retrieve the piece of pipe and proceeded to Burnsville without further incident.



At an early stage during preliminary construction of the driveway to our house site the small bulldozer doing the work encountered a large, firmly anchored oak stump right in the middle of the proposed driveway. The bulldozer operator said he couldn't do anything about the stump, but Roscoe believed he could get rid of it if I'd get some dynamite, a product which was much more readily available then; many people used small amounts to get rid of unwanted rock. I drove to the place in Spruce Pine where dynamite was sold, and after I signed a form agreeing not to blow up the U.S. Capitol, I was duly provided with several sticks. Since I wasn't accustomed to driving around with a cargo of explosives the return trip to Burnsville was accomplished with utmost precaution. I gave the sticks to Roscoe, who planted them in strategic spots around the stump. Then he rigged a fuse to a wire that he had attached to the electrical system of his truck. A turn of the ignition switch, and the stump was no more. My family and I were at the studio out of sight of the operation, but we heard the boom and witnessed a phenomenal shower of wood chips.

### Everett and The Stones

Another adventure involving Roscoe and stone came about when Everett was applying a stone facing to a cement block chimney on a house that friends of his were building. Roscoe was providing the stone. When work had progressed to a level some distance from the ground. it became necessary to hoist the stones up; Roscoe appeared with stones that were too heavy to be hoisted. Everett said to him, "Roscoe, these stones are too heavy. Can't you bring some smaller ones?" Roscoe, making no reply, walked off. Several weeks elapsed during which no smaller stones appeared. Finally, Everett asked me if I could intercede. I agreed, but knowing Roscoe, was not hopeful of a positive outcome. The next time Roscoe was working for me, I said, "You know, Everett really needs stone to finish that chimney." Roscoe looked me straight in the eye and said, "You tell Everett them stones ain't ripe yet." Everett never did get any more stones, at least from Roscoe.

Unfortunately, I later had a similar experience when Roscoe was doing some interior stucco work for me. He decided to try something different; while the stucco was still damp he brushed it with a broom, which destroyed the rougher effect I had hoped for. Instead of praising him and then making a suggestion, I told him that wasn't what I wanted. He did no more stucco work. Several weeks later a local painter appeared at my door saying he had heard that I needed some stucco work done.

Some of my most treasured times in Burnsville were the hours Roscoe and I spent hiking together. Sometimes we went to places close by such as Bolen's Pyramid, a low peak near Mount Celo in the Black Mountains. Other times we went to a beautiful waterfall near the town of Barnardsville or to the top of Flat Top Mountain which is in the middle of a wildlife refuge. Eventually, Roscoe developed severe arthritis which precluded such activities. On one of our last excursions we passed an old apple tree on an abandoned farm. The apples that had fallen to the ground were rotten, so Roscoe decided we needed some apples *from* the tree. He

climbed the tree with great alacrity and began shaking it vigorously. Of course, this maneuver provided us with far more apples than we needed or could carry away. This was the last time I saw Roscoe perform a feat of this kind.

It was on our return from this trip after dark that my faithful old station wagon decided it could go no further. I was able to steer it off the road at a place where there was fortunately room to do this. Roscoe and I found a house nearby and asked the occupants if we could use their phone to call a wrecker from Burnsville, some distance away. They weren't willing to let us in but did make a call for us. The wrecker duly arrived, and the driver was kind enough to take Roscoe and me back to Fire Tower Road after depositing the car at the garage. Next morning the mechanic called me to tell me that the poor old station wagon was beyond repair. I am eternally grateful to the old car for having gotten us back off the mountain before it expired.

### Lost Cove

Another adventure associated with Flat Top Mountain was an expedition to Lost Cove on which Roscoe led Everett and me. Lost Cove was a small remote settlement not reachable by road. It is perched on the side of the mountain overlooking the turbulent Nolichucky River. This place had been home to a small number of families until local authorities "suggested" that they move out, citing the extreme difficulty of providing education, mail service, spiritual guidance and medical attention. By the time of our visit the settlement was deserted except for one man, an outsider, who had bought property there. He was none too hospitable, and only grudgingly permitted us to stay long enough to take pictures, then invited us to leave, shotgun in hand.

We had reached Lost Cove by going to a meadow near the top of Flat Top Mountain where we parked the jeep, and then taking a really steep and seemingly endless trail down to the settlement. Every once-in-a-while we would cross a patch of loose rock, and Roscoe would cheerfully call out. "Watch out for copperheads. They love them loose rocks." An alternate route, a rather dangerous approach, is to walk across the railroad bridge over the Nolichucky River and then climb a long way up. When the place was still inhabited, people would wait for the train to come by and then they'd ride to Erwin, the nearest town, buy whatever they needed, and return on the next train. Of course, then they had to get their purchases back up that steep trail.

Once someone left a car parked by the side of the road above Everett's place. The car was full of all kinds of junk. After it had been there for several weeks Roscoe became curious about it and went up to the car to investigate. He saw what he thought was a body in the back seat. The next time I saw him he told me he thought there was a body in the car, and asked me if I would go look too. Well, I went with some trepidation. What did indeed appear to be a body in the dim light of the back seat turned out to be a bunch of rags and gunny sacks. Eventually, we found out that

the car belonged to a boy from a house further up the road. When the old jalopy conked out on him, he'd been able to get it off the road, but didn't have the cash to have anyone come to look at it right away. In time the car did disappear. This was the only time I can remember that Roscoe evidenced fear of anything.

Roscoe had a little dog which he kept tied to his bus. The dog's name was Polly although it was a gentleman dog (sort of like the cat named Uncle Elizabeth in the play, "I Remember Mama"). Polly had a tremendous bark for such a small creature, but wasn't much good as a watchdog because when Roscoe was away from the bus he/she wouldn't make a sound. You could always tell when Roscoe had company because then Polly would bark furiously. All of Roscoe's guests were received "al fresco," rain or shine.

Judy remembers the night Polly got away with her heavy chain dragging behind: "Chris (Wilson) and I were starting up the mountain by car when Roscoe stopped us. He was crying. He pleaded with us to try to find his beloved Polly. Happily, we did find her near a neighbor's house not far away, and returned her to Roscoe. From then on Polly was very friendly to me, and I was glad of it."

Roscoe also had quite a collection of cats. These were semi-feral creatures which didn't seem to have much of an attachment to Roscoe nor he to them. He did put out scraps for them. Occasionally, during the art school season, one of the art students would buy commercial cat food for the assembled multitude.

### "Honkering Down"

When he and I were both younger, Roscoe and I used to "honker (hunker) down" to talk. This position always used to be assumed by mountain people before the start of a serious conversation. First, both partners in the conversation would squat and exchange pleasantries, discuss the weather, inquire about each other's and families' health and anything else that could possibly precede but not have any relation to the real subject. Eventually one or the other would broach the question at hand. Only then did serious business begin.

As the years progressed, Roscoe's "holdings" expanded to the other side of the road. He built a series of small shacks, mostly covered with blue plastic tarpaulin, which became his reception chambers. Eventually, he found or was given a decrepit tubular metal garden chair which he placed between two of these structures. from this vantage point he was able, unnoticed, to check on comings and goings on the road.

Once when Roscoe was up on the mountain alone cutting down a tree, the tree fell prematurely, pinning Roscoe's leg under it. He was, in time, able to free himself and get to the road where a passerby found him and took him to the small local hospital. There a nurse started to cut his overalls off in order to examine his leg.

This gave Roscoe a fit. He said, "Ain't no woman gonna cut my pants off."

As you may imagine, Roscoe, was not one to haunt a doctor's office. Once he stepped on a nail that went right through the sole of his shoe, damaging his foot. When my neighbor, Carol, heard about this she brought antiseptic of some kind and told Roscoe to put it on the wound. Roscoe did as he was told, but the medicine had a mighty sting. He jumped up and down on his good foot and said, "What are you trying to do, kill me?"

One of Roscoe's favorite destinations, when he still had wheels, was Bonnie and Clyde's, a not very attractive eatery in the hamlet of Loafer's Glory, about a half-hour's drive from Burnsville. He also enjoyed going to Dover's Shell in Burnsville where he sat on the front step and socialized with whomever might be present. Dover's, in addition to being a filling station, was also a vegetable stand and local gossip exchange. Dover, and I suspect the rest of Burnsville, knew of my arrival in town very shortly after it occurred. Another place where Roscoe could often be found when he wasn't on the mountain was at the Blankenship's house on Mitchell Branch, the road leading from town to Fire Tower Road. Kermit Blankenship was a special friend. Kermit had his good qualities when he was sober (which wasn't very often). But Roscoe enjoyed visiting with Kermit and his parents. Kermit's mother, Harriett, was a saint. Over the years she shared her home with ill and indigent people, and would give you the shirt off her back. As a result of his penchant for strong drink Kermit often landed in jail. He was the only person I have ever visited in jail.

Mitchell Branch once had a rather unsavory reputation among local people, since it was where the local bootleggers lived and did their business. This reputation has long since been forgotten, but when the studio was first opened, if you said that the way to get there was up Mitchell Branch, the statement was often greeted with raised eyebrows.

As far as I know, Roscoe never had any romantic interest, although one of his trucks had a bumper sticker that proclaimed, "This vehicle stops for pretty girls." followed by his hand painted comment, "Woo, woo." Roscoe did have a brother who visited him on a rather regular basis.

### Moped Talk

Eventually, arthritis severely curtailed Roscoe's activities but didn't hamper his ability to talk. I spent hours with him discussing his mopeds which became his sole means of transportation after both of his trucks finally died. I didn't know anything about mopeds and I don't think he really knew much about them either but this was the main topic of conversation which on my part often consisted of, "Uh huh," or something equally profound, such as, "You don't say so." Either that or we would discuss some article that he had read in one of the *National Geographic* magazines that he had fallen heir to.



Not long after a moped became Roscoe's sole means of transportation, he was stopped by a highway patrolman who noticed that Roscoe didn't have a driver's license. The patrolman also discovered that Roscoe didn't have a registration for the moped nor did he have insurance. Roscoe duly made his appearance before the local magistrate who happened to be an acquaintance of Roscoe's. The magistrate dismissed the patrolman and then tore up the citation. He did warn Roscoe that he shouldn't drive into town, at least when the patrolman might see him.

Roscoe was truly interested in the outside world, and especially in Washington, D.C. I often thought I would like to bring him back with me to see the sights. Doubtless he would have been overwhelmed and would probably not have lasted more than a day or two. But then there would have been the problem of getting him back to the mountains. Since there was no public transportation to Burnsville from the nearest airport south of Asheville, he would have had to find his way home by some means. I was never able to arrive at a satisfactory solution to this problem, so the project was never carried out. Another potential difficulty was that I really didn't know if he would consent to stay in our house and eat meals with us if he did come to Washington.

#### The Final Move

Progress finally caught up with Fire Tower Road in the form of the Yancey County commissioners who decided that the road needed to be paved since it had become increasingly expensive to maintain the gravel road which at one point ran over some washboard rocks, a spot where gravel would never stick. Another facet of progress on the road was that the Post Office, apparently without consulting anyone who lived on the road, informed residents that the name would be changed to "Phillips Knob Road." To this day when I tell someone I live on Phillips Knob Road, they inevitably ask, "Where's that?", and when I tell them it used to be Fire Tower Road, there's an instant sign of recognition. Anyhow, Roscoe was informed that he no longer could leave his bus on the side of the road because it would be necessary to widen the road before paving it. No one knew what would happen next, but the road construction crew hitched the bus to a bulldozer and towed it across the road to a piece of land owned by the widow of a prominent Burnsville lawyer. She had readily granted permission for the move, and this is where Roscoe's bus is to this day. After the bus was moved Roscoe added a new "back porch" and steps which became the place where he received guests.

Roscoe's health continued to decline but he steadfastly refused to move out of the bus. One day a neighbor who stopped by to check on him found him dead, slumped over his kerosene stove which he had been attempting to refill. I will always miss Roscoe. I still miss hearing him yell, "Hey Jawn!" his unique way of announcing his presence. He never believed in knocking on the door. I miss his elfin grin. I miss talking to him about things mechanical although these discussions were mainly a

means of filling silences. My neighbor, Horace, who owned the land on the side of the road where Roscoe's bus had been parked for many years, said, "You know, I never thought I'd miss Roscoe, but I do."

After Roscoe died the neighbors took up a collection to buy him a suit and a casket. The undertaker donated his services, and Roscoe found his last resting place in the Marietta Atkins Cemetery which had been founded by a local lawyer as a burial place for those who, for whatever reason, could not be buried elsewhere.

John Bryans 2001  
Revised 2002