

About 2050 words

Datus Proper  
1085 Hamilton Road  
Belgrade. MT 59714  
(406) 388-3345

## DARK HOLLOW

A way of life has died,  
but the trout are still there.

[Typeface 1]

Fish a place long enough and it becomes a homestead, a personal stretch of boulders and water and trout. I've been proving my claim on Dark Hollow Run for twenty years now. You will understand, therefore, that I wondered about the other car parked on Skyline Drive, right where I always start my hike down to the stream. Maybe the visitor was just the usual refugee from the cities, out for a stroll on the Appalachian Trail, but then again I might find a fisherman ahead of me. I hurried down the mountainside with my rod and rucksack.

The other visitor was easy to catch. "Hill's getting hard to pull," she said. Her hair was more gray than red where it fell over the lace collar of her dress. Her name was Betty Cave and her only burden was a bunch of flowers, but it established a claim two hundred years older than mine. I read the names of her family when we got to what used to be the Dark Hollow settlement. There were more headstones in the clearing than Betty had flowers to decorate -- rough field stones, big ones for the adults and little ones, lots of little ones. One of the unmarked stones was



for the Cave who brought the family's red hair from Ireland to the Blue Ridge long ago. The oldest legible marker was for John G. Cave of the Virginia Light Artillery, C.S.A. Near it there were stones for Betty's parents and her sister Lula Belle.

Not far away was a fireplace, stones chinked with mud, standing lonely in the woods. Betty Cave had stories to go with that old hearth. It had been part of her family's cabin, once, and she remembered the days when her mother tended the fire and her father came home with food.

[Typeface 2 -- italics?]

Daddy used to bring a leather pouch with trout spilling over the top. He caught 'em on worms -- big fish, like this -- a foot long, some of 'em. They was real pretty. Mama cleaned 'em all and kept 'em cool in a stone jar in the spring house. The meat was pink when she cooked 'em. They tasted awful good.

[Typeface 1]

I strung up my rod, tied on a little dark-water fly, and worked upstream making back casts, when I could, but otherwise just pushing the line out. This sounds impossible -- like pushing a string -- but you get good at push-casting on Dark Hollow Run. When there is brush behind, you just pile line on the water at your feet, hold the rod straight up, and make half a roll-cast, the forward half. It's not a way to break distance records. The line goes where the rod-tip points, though, and the fish are not



far away. The little fly rights itself, shimmies its peacock body at the trout, and flashes you a V-for-victory sign with white wings. You hold the rod tip high so that the line does not get caught in the fast water at the tail of the pool. You want the fly to take life easy, like a big trout.

Watching a good fly is like watching a bird dog that knows what it's doing. You have faith. Almost every pool has at least a small fish -- in the middle, where a trout can hold in slow water and foray into the current for a passing snack, or in the calm patch above a boulder, or in little eddies at the head of the pool. When the fly dallies over just the right spot, the fish responds. A little one is a sparkle, making up its mind and pouncing in the same instant. A big trout is a shadow, lovely lazy rise without fuss.

The old-timers all say that the fish used to run larger than they do now. Betty Cave tends to understatement, like most of the mountain people, and you must not dismiss her foot-long trout as yarn-spinning. I don't know what has changed the ecology of the stream. Acid rain is probably involved and so are the young oaks and maples, which drink up moisture that used to reach the Run. There was more water for the fish when the Caves lived in Dark Hollow.

[Typeface 2]

We had 400 acres, all grass but for the orchard and the hemlocks around the house. We kept the brush cut down till the



government made us leave. We grazed 6 heifers and a horse and 2 milk cows, and Mama stored the butter in the spring house.

Grandma planted that snowball bush, too. It blooms every June and the apple trees still set fruit, but the pears and peaches are shaded out now. Mama used to can all the fruit. Mama and Daddy worked hard but we weren't hungry.

[Typeface 1]

I worked hard too, sneaking up to the tails of pools, sitting on a rock to keep my head below the trout's line of sight, and planning before I cast. The brook trout that took the fly were 2-year-olds about 7" long. I rose none of the big 3-year-olds. The concentration was tiring, more so than the walk down the mountain. I was relieved to reach the Lunch Pool, sit on a patch of moss, and pull out my food.

The Lunch Pool is one of those places that just grew around me over the years. Maybe it was in the middle of my homestead-water because I deserved a break, or maybe I staked my claim knowing that the pool was available. The sycamore tree beat me there by a long time, anyhow. It may have been growing even in the days of Great-grandfather Cave. The trunk was as thick as four Dark Hollow girls standing back to back, pale toes wriggling down into the pool.

I ate each of my rye crackers with a sardine dripping oil on it, and half-way through lunch there was a grumble over the ridge to the south. Dark clouds moved overhead fast but the thunder



stayed lazy. A few raindrops made rings in the pool while I rushed through my apple, and then there was another ring made from below the water rather than above. I stripped line off the reel and covered the fish with one false cast, not standing up. The trout drifted under the fly and took it and pulled with a strength almost unseemly, on such a small battlefield. Then the fish gave up and lay in my left hand. Both its mouth and its girth were big for its length of  $9\frac{1}{2}$ " and its belly was the deep red-orange of a maple tree. This was a 3-year-old, survivor of two spawning seasons but programmed by its genes to die before another. It died instead for my wife's dinner.

The shower was steady, by then, and I wasted no time. Another good fish took my fly in the next pool but the hook lost its grip. I changed to a fly with more clearance between point of hook and fat herl body, and in the two pools upstream I caught two more big fish, which meant that my wife and I could both have dinner. That's how it goes on Dark Hollow Run: you can fish for hours without a venerable trout, but the first shower gives you satisfaction.

The old fish hide when the water gets low. Then the rain comes and they move out, chase the small fry away from the best spots in the pools, and lie in wait, tails moving, eyes looking up. Even the first few raindrops revive some genetic recollection of the wetter, colder climate Betty Cave describes.

[Typeface 2]



I let the cat out one time and it froze in the snow before it got back in. I cried and cried.

My Daddy hiked down to the old copper mine for work in winter. He didn't have no boots -- had to put socks over his shoes and tie them up with tar strings. The snow was so deep that his clothes was froze up to his waist when he got home. We were happy to get the money.

There was eight cabins in Dark Hollow, then, and the church. They was awful good people, good Christian people. Daddy went around with a lantern in the snow when the diphtheria came. He visited the houses of sick people to pray. Two children died the same day. Daddy had to cut up a church bench to make a coffin for them.

[Typeface 1]

The climb back up through the woods to Skyline Drive was slow, my excuse being that I wanted to take an inventory of my homestead. Rain made that easier, too. The violets stood straighter, the wild geraniums glowed pink-purple, and the first white trilliums began to open. In what was left of the orchard at Betty Cave's old place, a mountain pheasant twisted off through gray trunks. We call them ruffed grouse now. I saw no woodcock, but further along the path a gray squirrel darted to the back side of its tree and I wondered why it was so spooky till a goshawk buzzed me. Its nest must have been nearby, with young hungry for small game.



Two bunches of deer, on the other hand, stood watching me tamely. Deer have become too abundant for their forage, recently -- a problem common in the national parks. Hunting is not allowed and there are not enough big predators to control populations.

[Typeface 2]

I don't remember deer in the '30s. Never heard Daddy name a deer, but he hunted mountain pheasants here in the hollow and walked to Big Meadow to shoot wood hens. They was funny little birds with long bills and round heads and big eyes.

We heard a mountain panther screamin' and hollerin' like a baby, one time, and our dog was so scared we let him inside. I looked out the window and saw the panther coming closeter [sic] and closeter. It had eyes like a piece of fire.

A bear broke down our smokehouse one night and stole a ham. Daddy tracked the bear down but he told me he didn't kill it, because I didn't like anything to get hurt. We had plenty of ham left, I remember. Wonder if some of it came from that bear.

Daddy tracked rabbits and squirrels with his little dog, and they did smell good when Mama cooked 'em. I remember she baked raccoons, too, with potatoes and carrots from the garden. We ate the mushrats and sold their hides. We didn't eat 'possums, but some folks did -- fattened them up and cooked 'em.

[Typeface 1]

Change would have come to the old settlement, in time, even



if the old families had been allowed to stay in their homes. Somebody would have driven a car to the cabins and the world would have followed, one vehicle at a time. People who had been part of nature would have erected television antennas in the heart of Dark Hollow.

With humans gone, the original vegetation returned, and if the young hardwoods drank some of the stream's water, they also protected the watershed from erosion. The trout were not big but they were doing better here than in most parts of their ancestral range. I expected to find the native wildlife waiting for me as long as I could manage the hard pull.

Something beautiful had been saved for me -- and taken from the Caves.

[Typeface 2]

When they first built Skyline Drive, I would hike up there and sell little paper flowers. Mama made 'em for me. I'd charge a dime, but some of the guests would stop their cars and give me a dollar. I was five years old.

After awhile, the government pushed us off our land and made it part of Shenandoah National Park. That was before the war started -- 1939 or the edge of '40, I think. Daddy got a dollar an acre. Friends gave us use of a house outside the Park -- they knew we couldn't pay rent. We wanted to go back to Dark Hollow but the government burnt down all eight cabins. Burnt the church, too.



Daddy didn't have any work. All he knew was farming and hunting and fishing. I remember him sitting outside every evening, cryin' and cryin'.