

The Memoirs of William Emmett Rittenhouse

Old Wintergreen

Lynn's Note: These are excerpts from William Emmett Rittenhouse's memoirs, son of Henry Judson and Anna W. Turner Rittenhouse and brother of Sallie Rittenhouse Phillips who was featured in the June 2020 edition of the Nelson County Historical Society Backroads blog. Emmett was born in Old Wintergreen, Virginia on April 24, 1881 and died on July 15, 1951 at 70 years of age. His memoirs are very extensive. I published just a small portion of them starting in the August 2005 issue of Backroads and finishing in the October issue of 2006. I am choosing to pick just a few random pages that he wrote about concerning what life was like in the Old Wintergreen/Nellysford area when he was a young man.

Introduction:

Dear Children:

I am writing a few things down because I have been sick and not able to do anything else and am doing this to pass away the time. I want to leave some record of the times when I was a boy down on a farm in Virginia as I know by experience that young people living now have no idea of how things were then, than I can picture in my mind of how things were in Julius Caesar's day. I know I am no writer and that I have no education, for I did not have the opportunity to get much learning and the people in that day did not set much store in education; that physical strength and endurance was what they admired people for and never paid much attention to intellectual accomplishments. The man who could hoe the most corn or plant the most rows of tobacco or shuck the most corn and carry a two-hundred-pound bag of fertilizer the longest distance across plowed land, or could endure the most cold, or stand the most heat without complaining was the greatest man. I do not know if you will be able to understand it or not, that I split my infinitives so that what I say may be opposite to what I mean and I do not know if you will bother yourselves to read it or not as I know it has no merit. But coming from me, I hope you will try and wade through it because it comes from your father.

“The wisdom of a learned man cometh by opportunity of leisure; and he that hath little business shall become wise. How can he get wisdom that holdeth the plow, and that glorieth in the goad, that driveth oxen, and is occupied in their labours, and whose talk is of bullocks? He giveth his mind to make furrows; and is diligent to give the kine fodder. So every carpenter and workmaster, that laboureth night and day: and they that cut and grave seals, and are diligent to make great variety, and give themselves to counterfeit imagery, and watch to finish a work: the smith also sitting by the anvil, and considering the iron work, the vapour of the fire wasteth his flesh, and he fighteth with the heat of the furnace: the noise of the hammer and anvil is ever in his ears, and his eyes look still upon the pattern of the thing he maketh: he setteth his mind to finish his work, and watcheth to polish it perfectly. So doth the potter sitting at his work, and turning the wheel about with his feet. He fashioneth the clay with his arm and boweth down his strength before his feet:

he applieth himself to lead it over and he is diligent to make clean the furnace: All these trust to their hands: and everyone is wise in his work. Without these cannot a city be inhabited: and they shall not dwell where they will, nor go up and down. They shall not be sought for in public council, nor sit high in the congregation: they shall not sit on the judge's seat, nor understand the sentence of judgment: they cannot declare justice and judgment: and they shall not be found where parables are spoken. But they will maintain the state of the world, and all their desire is in the work of their craft.”

All of the romance has been taken out of farming. You cannot feel very romantic with gasoline fumes shooting out of a tractor or truck in your face. Farming is now more of a business than just to make a living out of. You may make more money but you do not get more satisfaction out of doing your work and take pride in your skill in the handling of an axe or hoe. The year before I left home, I cleaned up a mountainside and raised a crop of tobacco on it that brought me a little over one hundred dollars and what pleasure I got out of this.

Every day for more than a month, except on Sundays, I worked hard from sunup to sundown cutting down trees and piling them up and burning the branches and saving the larger logs to burn my plant beds with and to cure up the tobacco all by myself, without anyone to say a word to and I never got lonesome or even felt I was away off by myself. You do not get lonesome with a hoe or an axe if you use them, and what pleasure I got out of this work. I could sit down at night and look at what I had accomplished that day and I was very proud of it and looking forward to the planting of my crop and to the raising of it and finally to the selling of it and the money I would get for it. It took more than a year then, from the time you started your crop, before you would get any money for your work and when you had waited this long and worked hard every day in the year for it, you know how to appreciate it. After I got the tobacco planted and worked it with a hoe and saw the plants growing, it was a great thrill for me. I did every bit of work with just a hoe. I did not have a horse to plow it with and had to do all the work by hand and it all was a part of me. Of course, it may look simple now to think that I was so proud of my work but it was not so simple then as there was lots of other boys doing the same thing and if there was a rivalry between them to see who could grow the best crop and get the best price for it. When we'd meet at church or store, it was all our talk about our crops and I think that this was a whole lot better than discussing football and baseball games away off in some far away city where some baseball Czar was making millions of dollars for himself by entertaining a lot of lazy people that were so dumb, they could not entertain themselves and had to pay someone else to entertain them. When I gave the tobacco its last working, when I would pull up all of the dirt in a cone around the stalk and see how pretty it looked, and looking forward to the time when I would save the crop because I was nearer to my goal. It took me ten days to do this and I liked to go back up there at night after I had eaten my supper and had time to look around and see how much I had accomplished that day and how much more remained to be done. After the sun had gone down and the moisture would rise, how fresh the plants would look and I would stand there and admire them and think this was all the work of my hands, which made me very happy. The full moon would come up over the hills

in the east and cast soft moonbeams over me and the plants and the surrounding woods and all was well with the world.

I would sit down on a log at the edge of the woods and think of other times and other countries and other people who had stood out at night; on just such a night as this and would look at the same moon in all its glory.

I have wanted for a long time to write a narrative of some of the things that a farm boy has to do and of some of the people that lived just after the Civil War, but I was always so busy scratching for a living that I never had the time to do anything I wanted to do, and never got around to it until I got sick and was not able to do anything else.

You will always find that in this world, you will have to do the things that you do not want to do in order to make a living. For the things we want to do, do not pay us anything. And as a matter of history, I think that these things should be kept and you will probably have a history of people that no one else has.

The Swamp

It was late in August in the year 1896 in the beautiful Piedmont section of old Virginia where August days are perfect. The sun shown with a golden glow and there was an azure haze on the summits of the Blue Ridge. All nature was at rest. You could only hear the humming of the bees in the honeysuckle on the old rail fence and the droning of the katydids in the straggling locust trees that lined both sides of the lane. All was covered in a mantle of dust from the old dirt road that ran between the two fences from the long August drought. From afar came the sweet smell of fox grapes ripening in the alder swamp nearby. The tops of the grape vines were covered over with Queen Ann's lace and it seemed as if some fairy had woven a cream-colored mantle over the vines to hide the ugliness of the morass. All around the edges of this swamp grew wild touch-me-nots that pop open in your face if you just touch them with the tip end of your finger. They are very delicate flowers and are orange-yellow, matted with brown, with petals and stems of wax-like material of the same color. The humming birds were flitting about among them with their long bills extracting nectar. They would sometimes balance themselves above the flowers so perfectly you could not see them move and then make long dashes from one plant to another with lightning-like rapidity so fast you could scarcely follow them with the eye.

On the old rail fence, the ground squirrels or chipmunks would scamper along with their striped coats of gold and brown, looking at you with their beady eyes and dart into their dens in the rocks. Lizards would slip along on the rails; one ran up my leg one day and I caught him under my pants leg and held him so tight I ended up choking the life out of him.

There were also honey bees and several kinds of bumble bees, yellow jackets and wasps helping the humming birds to gather the nectar. Butterflies of all varieties and colors interspersed with the bees, flitting from flower to flower. At the far corner of the swamp, you could see the fresh dirt from a groundhog den. I have sat there for hours with a shot gun hid behind a large chestnut tree for him to come out but he never did while I was holding a gun. But when I went by there without one, I would always see him scamper into his hole. One day while I was sitting there with both

barrels of the gun cocked, I fell asleep and what woke me up was the gun going off. I had gotten to my spot while the groundhog was out but did not know it. He didn't either until he came back and saw something between him and his hole. He jumped over me, trying to get in and knocked the gun down and it went off. It liked to scared both of us to death!

Occasionally you would see a small black bear or Virginia deer poke its head out in the bright sunlight and would be temporarily blinded by the sun. They would withdraw to the darkness of the swamp until later in the evening to look around. Above off to one side, high up in the sky you would see six or eight buzzards circling around in the air in long spirals looking for the carcass of some horse or cow that w had dragged out on the hillside, for that was the way we got rid of dead animals. We thought God made buzzards to eat them. People had not thought of making soap out of them like they do now. I remember once we had the cholera in our hogs and nearly every one of them died and hardly left us enough for meat. The poor things came as near to the house to die as the fence would let them and the buzzards would walk around among them, hopping from one to the other, and the dogs were there and would chase away the buzzards for awhile but they would soon settle down and start eating. Buzzards spend so much time flying that they hardly know how to walk and they certainly look funny trying to walk along. They kind of waddle on the ground. That was the most dismal sight I've ever seen. Now you never hear of hog cholera. I suppose they have done something for the hogs as well as for human beings so they do not have so many diseases.

Off to one side in the field you would see a bird that we called a bee martin putting on stunts. He would fly straight up into the air for a good distance and stand almost still and then all at once he would make a dive straight to the earth and then check himself within a few feet of the ground and fly back to his former position and do it all over again. They certainly seemed to get a great deal of pleasure out of putting on this act. But, of course, that was before the days of airplanes and the birds had the air to themselves with no competition.

Across the swamp, beyond Ewing's orchard, over to what we used to call the Hind Leg place, we would see a red fox trotting alongside the mountain. This was also the crossing-over place for the foxes when they were being chased by the dogs from one mountain to another and by making long jumps from fallen trees and rocks, would throw the dogs off their track and it would take them some time to work it out. By then the fox would take a rest for a while. I have stood perfectly still and have had foxes come close enough to me to hit them with a stick but I never did. I liked to watch the dogs run around in circles, working out the trail.

On the old Orchard Ridge, you would hear a pheasant beating a tattoo on an old log, calling his mate. Far back in the deep hollows of the Blue Ridge you would hear an owl calling out, "Who, Who."

The swamp was full of all kinds of life; the Bob O' Links (Red Winged Blackbirds) were there and they look somewhat like a black bird but have a tip of red on the top of their wings. They would fly in and out of the swamp, showing a flash of red. They are very beautiful and occasionally you would see a Cardinal but they are very shy and you can't get near them. There were also Bluebirds and Baltimore Orioles that make a hanging nest that swings down from a limb and has

a kind of bottle neck at the top that the parents go in to get to their young. Their nests are a work of art and no matter how hard the wind blows, the young will not fall out.

On the other side of the swamp, in the stubble field where we had cut wheat, you would see quail or partridge leading their brood and calling out, "Bob White, Bob White." If you came upon them unexpectedly, the mother bird would make a peculiar noise and all the young birds would disappear right from under your eyes and you could not find a one. They are the color of the leaves and they could hide under one so you would not see them. The mother would then flutter off, dragging one wing as if she was crippled, to lead you off in another direction. They are wonderfully smart in attracting your attention to something else.

Old Aunt Liza Baker lived in a log cabin in my tobacco patch near the swamp and you would see her turkey hen stealing off to her nest in the swamp. These birds are very smart and will make their nests out a good way from their home. When they are setting and get off their nest to find food, they will make round-about movements to keep you from finding out where her nest is. They will pretend they are going right to it and when they catch you not looking at them, they will make a dart in the opposite direction and it is hard to tell where she went. They could fool me every time.

I had a spring in the swamp and it was covered over with alder bushes and fox grape vines on top of the alders. I had to bend down to get to it. The water just boiled up out of the ground and the ground there was covered with some kind of tall grass and skunk cabbage and there were stagnant ponds of water all about with some type of green scum on it.

You would see striped water snakes gliding into the water or a long black snake sunning himself on a dead log. Bull frogs with green eyes would jump into the water when they saw you. Once I was walking in the swamp barefooted with some companions and they yelled out to me. I looked down to see my foot standing right in the middle of a copperhead moccasin. His head was on one side of my foot and his tail on the other. I was choking him so he could not bite but you should have seen me jump!

The February 1898 Blizzard

My favorite sport in the summertime was to go out at night on a rocky hillside and run up and down the hill barefooted to see the fire fly out of the white rocks. I have been out at night riding horseback and noticed when the horse's hooves would strike a rock, the fire would fly, so at night I would go out in the front of our house on an old farm road that was covered with white flint rocks and run over them to see the fire fly. My feet were like what Dr. Everett said about the people on Tye River; that they never wore out their shoes from the outside; their feet were so hard they wore them out from the inside. I was talking to him one day after I left home and began to wear shoes regularly. I told him about my shoes hurting my feet. Of course, he knew how hard I was raised and he said, "Oh, you are just getting to be civilized." He said that it was just naturally expected that shoes would hurt your feet when you weren't used to wearing them.

In the wintertime when I went to school I had to walk about a mile and a quarter and it was the muddiest road I ever saw when it was not frozen up. One day the teacher lost her overshoe in the mud and never could find it.

In February of 1898, we had the worst blizzard that was recorded in this part of the state. It snowed for two days and it was light, fluffy snow and after it stopped, the wind blew the snow up in great drifts and the weather was bitter cold.

The Rockfish River froze over hard and the snow drifted in the lane out to the store as high as the rail fence. You could only see the tops of the fence stakes sticking out a few inches and it stayed like that for more than a month and got so hard that we drove the horses and wagons over it, hauling tobacco to the railway station. You could not tell where the river was and I used to slide down the hills on my sled. I came off the Orchard Ridge one day and hit a small locust tree and the sled stopped when it hit the tree but I kept on going through the limbs and was picking out thorns for a week.

In the wintertime, when it was raining, Papa used to put us to washing harnesses. We would wash them one day and let them hang in the shed all night until they were dry and then we'd grease them. He always had something for us to do, no matter what the weather. I did all the going to the mill with the corn. I would turn the corn sheller and one of the smaller boys would feed the ears into it and when I had shelled two bushels and put it into a sack, I would put it across old Net's back and straddle it, taking it over to the mill and leave it there. Then I'd come home and shell another two bushels and take that over and bring the first one back. I had to make the trip to the mill three times a day; once for us and once each for the two farm hands that worked for us. This took up most of the day and sometimes old Net would fall down and the sack would fall off and as I couldn't lift the sack, I would get two fence rails and lay one end upon his back and the other on the ground and roll the sack up on his back. About the time I'd just about get it up there, Net would move over because the rails hurt his back and I'd have to start all over again.

One morning in the winter they started me out before I got breakfast and gave me a cold sweet potato to eat and I got choked off of it and had to come back so they could beat me on the back and pound me until they got it all out. I had to go to the mill every two weeks but I did not mind. I liked it better than working in the fields; it was like a vacation to me.

Childhood Chores

Another thing I had to do when I was young was carry corn out to the hogs. In the spring of the year, Papa would put his hogs over in what we called the Long Hollow. It was about a mile from the house and he would fill a bushel basket with ears of corn and put it on my back and I had to carry it to them. A large part of the way was up a steep hill so I would put the basket on top of my shoulders and hold my arms in front of me and reach back to grasp the basket with one arm on each side of my head. The when I broke down carrying the basket this way, I would lean up against the fence and ease it down and carry it on my arm for a while. After this wore all the skin off my arm, I would try it up on my back again. The last part of the way was up the steep hill and I thought I would never make it.

When I finally got home, Papa would send me down into the field to drive the horses up to the stable. They would always be down at the very farthest corner of the field and would start off very well, but when they got up near the gate they would begin to hang back and one would veer off to the right and another to the left and would show they were up to mischief and getting nervous and fidgety and biting at each other. All at once they would make a break and take out in different directions and turn back down in the field, tails in the air and snorting and acting like wild horses. They would never stop until they reached the farthest corner and I'd have to do it all over again.

Sometimes I had to drive them up three or four times before I could get them into the stable. They seemed to have some kind of secret sign they gave each other; when to run. They would go along, humble and nice for a while and all at once they would, at the same time, take a notion to break away. They seemed to enjoy themselves watching when they left me standing there. I think they were laughing at me!

I used to go with the other children to pick blackberries. I ate all I picked but the others would sell theirs. They would take them over to the William H. Crawford place where a man named Dawson made wine of them. This was three miles from where we lived and they got six cents a gallon for them. Now in 1946, they are about forty cents a quart. Dawson also made oil from sassafras roots and the poor people would dig them to sell to him. Uncle Woodson bought a milk cow from us by digging roots. I would walk by where he was at work and ask him how he was getting along and he would say that he had the cow's head out and later he would say he had her shoulders out and then he said he had her half-way out. He worked hard all summer and finally paid for her.

In the fall I would go chestnut hunting. I never found any more than I could eat but the others would sell theirs. At first, they would sell them for ten cents a pound but the price would drop in a few days to almost nothing. I have seen them sell for a half-cent a pound, thirty cents a bushel and they picked up a lot at that price. That was the way a lot of the people got money enough to buy clothes and shoes for their children and themselves. John Diggs picked up seventy-five dollars' worth of chestnuts one fall and that was a powerful lot of money back then. After he got his tobacco in the house, he would take his wife and children out in the woods to pick and stayed there all the time the chestnuts were falling. You had to get them while they were there.

I also used to go huckleberry hunting. I never heard of anyone selling them as they were not very plentiful but were used to make pies and preserves. Some folks would hunt ginseng roots but this was never very popular up here like it was in southwest Virginia.

These are just a few memories of my childhood.