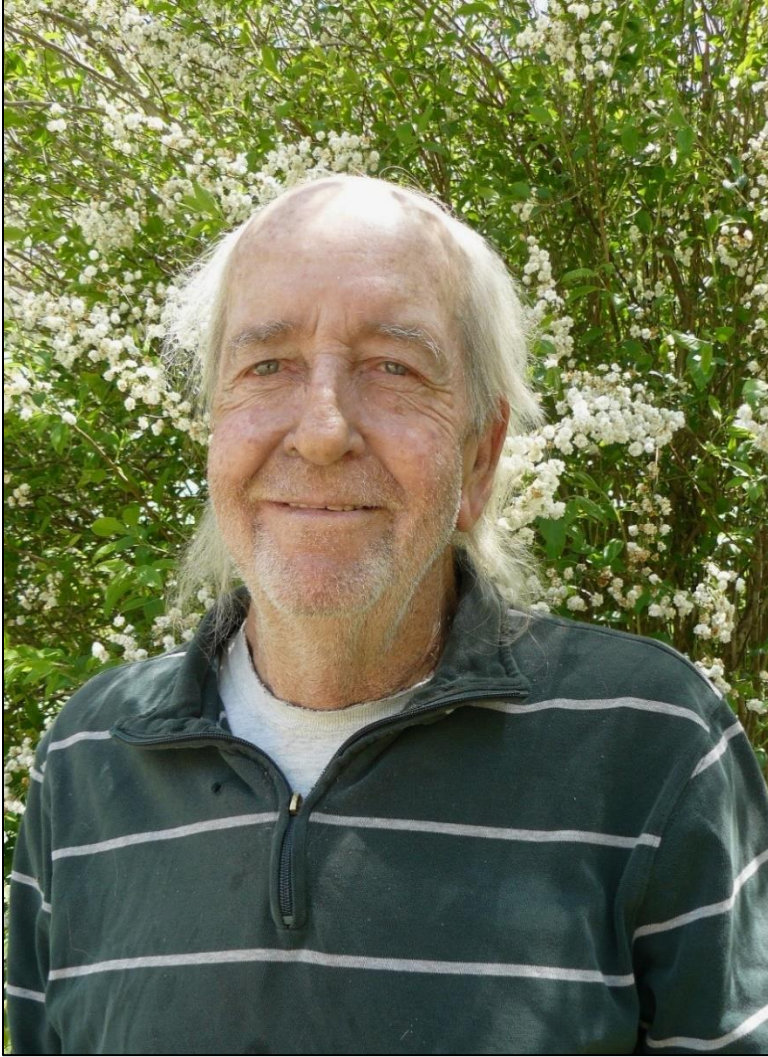


Dennis Roberts: Jack of All Trades and Master of Many

By Lynn Coffey



Sitting comfortably on the front porch of the Roberts home along the North Fork of the Tye River, with background music from the river and the mountains as a backdrop, I talked to Nelson County native, Dennis Roberts, on a warm spring morning. Dennis is one of those individuals who is naturally gifted in many areas of life. Like most of the men who grew up in the mountains, he learned how to do things not from higher education but simply by doing them. Or as they say, he is a man endowed with a lot of common or horse sense. He's had various types of jobs over his lifetime that have served him well and he has done, and continues to do, most anything he sets his mind to. He is extremely well-read and earlier in life traveled the country but, in the end, came back to his Nelson birthplace. Originally, I wanted to interview him about being a sawyer at the Tyro sawmill

Dennis at his home on the North Fork of the Tye River that he and his brother Steve started in the 1970s but I soon realized he is so knowledgeable about his own family genealogy as well as the lives of the people he grew up with in Nelson County that this would be a two-fold story about both. Travel back in time as Dennis recalls his earliest ancestors and memories of his youth.

On the maternal side of his family, counting back seven generations from his mother, starting with Edmund Fitzgerald (1699) who lived in Adare, County Limerick, Ireland and continuing down to Edmund's son John Bannister Fitzgerald (1735-1824) who was born in Ireland but moved to the U. S. and married his wife Mary Hawkins Bartlett (1742-1779) in Amherst County in 1755. John's son Bartlett Hawkins Fitzgerald (1759-1836) and his wife Maskey Coleman Fitzgerald (1760-1836) settled in what is now Nelson County, Virginia. Their son, James Coleman Fitzgerald (1787-1876) married Susan Nales (1793-1822) and continued to live in the same area. James' son, Zephaniah Coleman Fitzgerald (1810-1898) married Mary Polly Coffey (1820-1869) and their

son, Achilles “Cutch” Fitzgerald (1844-1917) married Mary Elizabeth Fitzgerald Fitzgerald ((1833-1924). Their daughter, Alice Washington Fitzgerald (1870-1960) married Wade Reaves Fitzgerald (1871-1941). Alice and Wade’s daughter, Hattie Fitzgerald, (1912-2001) was the mother of Judith Kyle (January 6, 1945), Steve Winston, (April 28, 1948), and Dennis Ray Roberts (August 31, 1951). Dennis’s grandfather Wade was the son of Rev. James Riley Fitzgerald, a well-known minister and justice of the peace who preached at Christian churches in Nelson County, including Evergreen, Mountain Top, Beech Grove, Wintergreen and White Rock.



Alice Washington Fitzgerald

Dennis’s grandmother, Alice W. Fitzgerald



Gravestone of Achilles Washington Fitzgerald

Alice Fitzgerald’s father, Achilles, lived at the base of the falls and he and his wife Mary Elizabeth are buried in an enclosed graveyard near their original home, along with their last child who died at three years of age and another grave possibly belonging to Mary Elizabeth’s sister. Achilles’ son, Charles Bland Fitzgerald, also lived in a house on the lower side of the falls, just down from where his parents lived.

During the 1920s, the Massie and Ryan families owned a clubhouse at the foot of Crabtree Falls and Dennis’s grandfather, Wade, acted as a fishing guide for them.

Dennis’s mother, Hattie, was one of nine children and during her younger years, along with many of her siblings, she was hired out to different families as a domestic. As a young girl, she worked at Oak Ridge and several other large farms in Rockbridge and Nelson Counties. Hattie never married until much later in life but she began her family while in her thirties. Judith was born in the Lynchburg hospital because at that time Hattie was visiting with her sister, Mazie, in

Lynchburg. Steve and Dennis, the youngest, were born at the home of their grandparents, who lived at the old homeplace about a mile from the current Crabtree Falls parking lot. Hattie had moved home after the death of her father, and was living with her mother and brother Bill. Dennis said that originally the home consisted of one room but later another addition was built as well as an interior kitchen. Up to that time it had a detached outside kitchen like many of the older homes in the mountains. Dennis remembers that his grandmother had a bed in one corner of the room, his uncle Bill in another, and his mom and siblings stayed in the added-on portion. “At one point my grandmother had a broken hip and was bedridden until she died in 1960.

The Roberts children all attended grades one through seven at Fleetwood School in Massies Mill and went on to graduate from the Nelson County High School in Lovingston. Dennis remembers their early bus drivers were Edwin Seaman, Elizabeth Humphries, and Parrish Strickland.



Old hand-carved marker for Wade Fitzgerald



Newer grave marker for Wade and Alice

The family’s home church was Evergreen Christian Church on the North Fork of the Tye River where Routes 56 and 687 meet. The old church was built in the 1800s and Dennis’s great-grandfather, Rev. James Riley Fitzgerald, preached many a Sunday there.

As a young teen, Dennis had a Grit paper route and on Saturdays he delivered papers to all the older mountain people on the mountain. “I was surrounded by all these ancient people who gave me the best advice in life. As a child I loved sitting on the porch with my mother and Aunt Mirl, listening to them talk while they were shelling peas or peeling peaches. They would talk for hours

about the old people and I remember a lot of it.” Dennis’s uncle Houston, who lived over by the falls, had an apple butter kettle and in the fall the family peeled apples together and made butter.

Later, Dennis met his sister’s husband, an aspiring actor and folk singer from Greenwich Village, New York, who was very educated and knowledgeable. He became readily available to Dennis and added to his education through books, records, and the general “beatnik” movement; people who were involved with starting Greenpeace and well connected to politics. In his own words, “In just a few short years I suddenly went from being a simple country boy to a high-scale, up-front leader in the Civil Rights Movement.” But even with all this newfound education, Dennis still relied on the common-sense values of mountain people like Clara Zink Coffey, an early school teacher who taught at the old Zink’s Mill School. Clara lived with her son, Johnny, in a home at the junction of the North and South Forks of the Tye River on Route 56. Dennis said, “She was a sweet lady who taught me an immense amount of things in life.”



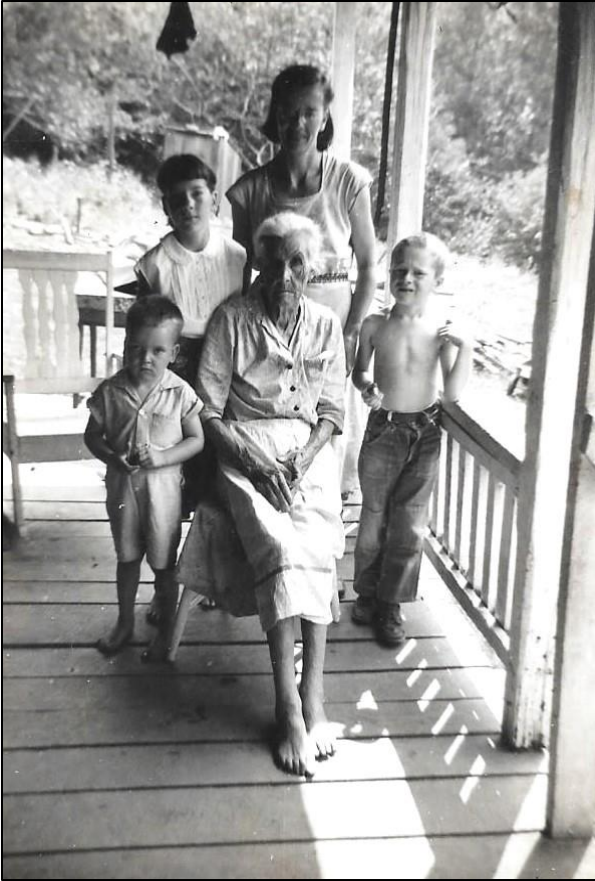
Wade Reaves Fitzgerald

Dennis also shed some light on the old mountain tradition of calling a person’s children by their father’s first name as an identification of the family. For instance, his grandfather Wade’s offspring would be known as Hattie Wade, Gordon Wade, Houston Wade, even though their last name was actually Fitzgerald.

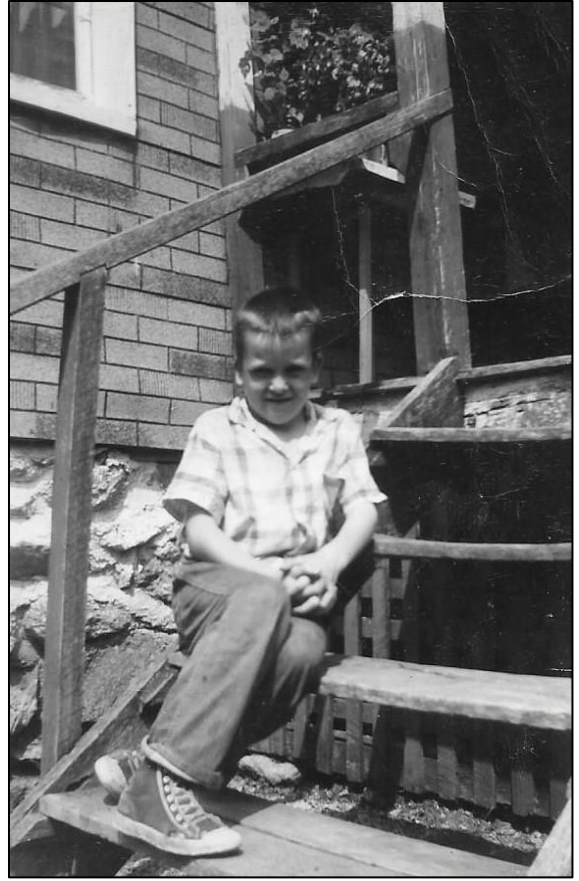
In the 1970s the government was trying to acquire land around Crabtree Falls as a part of National Forest project for future preservation. “Grandma left the property to her nine children,48 grandchildren, and 15 to 20 great-grandchildren. It took them over two years to contact everyone in the Fitzgerald family who owned a part of the property and secure it for the U. S. Forest Service. The government wanted to buy up all the land around the falls so commercial development would be kept out, so we had to move.”

Dennis and his brother, Steve, were running a Frick sawmill at their Crabtree property and were planning on building a house. A lawyer named Charles Trainum, who understood the situation, owned the old Patrick Cabell Massie home known as “Three Springs.” Located on Route 56 on the outskirts of Tyro, Trainum said he would give the home and several acres to Dennis’s family if they would build him a log cabin. Dennis laughed and said, “We built him the house that started my career in house building!” Before the family was ready to move into Three Springs, Dennis said the old home had sat vacant for around thirty years and was being used for hay storage so floor sanding and interior painting had to be finished before the family

could move in. Nevertheless, “It was kind of a shock to move from a one-room house into a home that boasted fifteen rooms, including a bathroom,” said Dennis.



Alice, Hattie and her children, August 1955



Dennis, nine, at the Crabtree home, 1960



Dennis and his mother at the homeplace, July 10, 1965

The two brothers bought a Meadows sawmill with a 48-inch circular blade that they purchased from Fulton Fitzgerald and set up their mill on the Three Springs property between 1973-1974 and began building log cabins for people as well as cutting custom lumber for people who were acquiring old homes in the area and fixing them up to live in. In his career, Dennis said he has built 28 houses, 16 of which were sawn from the mill, with the rest being kit houses.



Dennis was living at Three Springs with his mother and Steve when he married his first wife in 1975 but the marriage only lasted a few years and around 1980 he left Nelson County and headed west to see what he could see on the other side of the country. He first went to Louisiana, then Houston, Texas, where he worked a few temporary jobs to get enough traveling money and then went to Oklahoma where he worked in the oil patch and as a handyman. He accumulated enough money to buy a car

Three Springs: the home built by Patrick C. Massie and drove to Wyoming to do some trout fishing for a few months. He came back to Nelson County in 1981 when a man he had built a log cabin for wasn't satisfied and he had to go to court. He moved back in the Three Springs house with his brother, Steve, who later sold the home back to the Massie family. Dennis's part included one acre and the sawmill which he continues to operate with his son, Houston.



Roberts wedding: /r Steve, Hattie, Bev, Dennis and Judith

After he came back to Nelson County in 1981, he met his future wife, Beverly White, at a party and after dating a few years they married on August 11, 1984. Beverly was an elementary school music teacher in Nelson County, teaching at Massies Mill, Fleetwood, Lovingson, and Tye River Elementary Schools before retiring after 41 years of service. In earlier years she also worked part-time at Wintergreen Ski Resort and found Dennis a part-time job in addition to his saw mill work.

“I worked seasonal for the first year and in mid- summer they called me and said we have an opening for a guy to take care of all the pools and nature trails. So, in the summertime I took care of the nature trails and six or seven swimming pools as well as pumping water to the golf course.

In the wintertime, I made snow. I had a great interest in the art of making snow and decided to be known as the best snowmaker in the south. And I accomplished that in my own mind and professionally. I devoted my career to understanding what I was doing to make snow. I never went outside; I just ran the compressor building which is where all the air and water came from. I learned how to mix it and pump it and get the twelve snowmakers out there to do what I said do, which was difficult.”

I asked Dennis how he knew how to do this type of work and he said, “By studying.” He said, “In the middle seventies, actual man-made snow came on the scene and everyone was trying to figure out how to make snow and I was right in there with them. Later, York Snow came in with an automated system that was computer controlled which is the best manual automatic system I’ve ever seen. They gathered all my data together and created a system based on my findings and I became internationally known. I retired from Wintergreen after thirty-five years of work.”

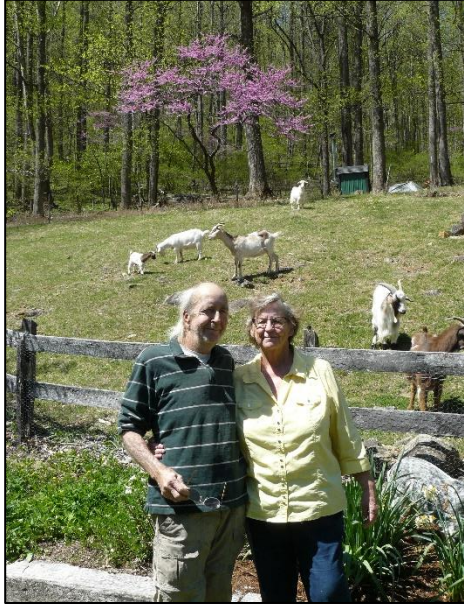
Before marriage, Bev was living in the old Ed Carr home on the North Fork of the Tye River and after she and Dennis married, they continued living in the two-up, two-down, home (two rooms upstairs, two rooms downstairs) until he began building their present home on the same property. He cut all the logs and did all the millwork himself. It took him three years to complete but the final product couldn’t be any nicer. The 3,500 sq. foot home has an open concept with an extra-large central living room, kitchen and dining area, with two bedrooms and baths on each end. An abundance of windows makes the interior light and airy and the large soaring windows in the living room are home to many plants that are thriving. The woodwork, including floor, ceiling, walls, and everything in between, has all been cut, milled, and installed by Dennis.

Dennis and Beverly are the parents of two sons; William Houston, born March 31, 1987, and Hampton Wade, born December 10, 1989.

In addition to working at the mill, Dennis and Bev keep goats on their 80-acre property and he is a big gardener. He has in his possession an 1812 gardening manual that he still uses today. It has helpful hints such as *if you want your beans to sprout and come up within days, soak the beans in pond water two hours before planting.* “Any tips you pick up from the ancients, are usually tried and true because they were



subsistence farmers and knew **Dennis and sons, Hampton and Houston at Houston’s wedding** the best way to plant. If they planted something, it *had* to come up! My main focus now are cucumbers and tomatoes because you can give them away without any instructions.”



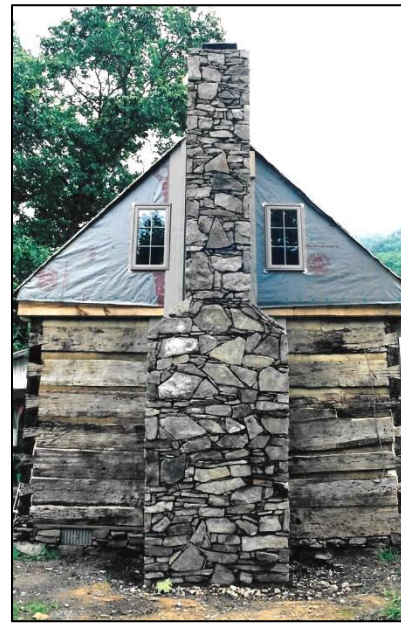
Beverly and Dennis, April 13, 2023 at their North Fork home

Adjacent to their home, stands the old Julian Parr fishing camp which was built in the early 1940s. At one point it had a pond but Hurricane Camille destroyed the dam in 1969 and washed the original pond out. The camp suffered damage from the water and mud and it was washed off its foundation. Dennis bought it in 2000 and completely renovated it inside and out, reconstructed the pond and the Roberts now rent it out as a successful Airbnb.

Along with all his woodworking talents, Dennis is also an accomplished rock mason. He laid a beautiful rock wall and interior fireplace at his home and was responsible for the incredible rock chimney he built at the old Coffey homeplace, located across the river from his property.



The Coffey chimney in the process of being built



The finished rock chimney

I remember taking pictures of the chimney as it was being erected, never knowing it was Dennis Roberts and his sons who were responsible for building it. The rock used in the chimney was called Cumberland fieldstone that came out of Charlottesville. He said he is proud because it was one of the finest pieces of work he's ever done and I had to agree with him!

Today, the Roberts and Sons Sawmill is the "go-to" place for anyone wishing to have custom lumber milled. In addition to custom sawing, the men cut cords of firewood and small bundles of camping firewood. When asked the mill's actual location, Houston volunteered it was in the "Tri-State Area" of Tyro, Roseland and Massies Mill! The day I visited, both of Dennis's sons were there and I asked when they started working at the mill, both laughed and said they've been there since they were kids, catching boards off the sawmill. When they were older, Houston initially worked six years for the U. S. Forest Service as a forest warden in three counties but in 2014 he gave up the badge and uniform and came to work fulltime with his dad. Several years ago, he bought the original log cabin that Dennis and Steve built for the lawyer who owned Three Springs and he and his wife now live there. Hampton now builds houses for a living but continues to be the "mill engineer" and does the maintenance on the sawmill machinery and helps out with anything when they need him. He lives in a cabin close to his parent's home on the North Fork. The boys dubbed their father, "Head of Operations," at the sawmill and it's clear the three get along famously. The Roberts also rely on a man by the name of Andy Johnson who works alongside

them and helps keep things running smoothly at Roberts and Sons Sawmill.

The mill still has the original Meadows 48" circular saw that Dennis and his brother, Steve, started out with in the early 1970s. When they purchased it from Fulton Fitzgerald, the wooden framework the saw was attached to had deteriorated so Dennis replaced it with a metal frame and set it on a concrete slab. He keeps the old machine well-oiled and maintained so it saws just as well as it did when they first bought it.

The mill also has three molder/planer machines that are capable of making up to eight-inch tongue and groove paneling as well as intricate molding for both interior and exterior work. The first planer, which is kept outdoors under a covered roof, was manufactured before 1925 and is still used regularly. Another smaller mill about the same vintage is kept in a large inside room and can cut up to 24" boards on one side before having to be flipped to cut the



Dennis beside an early 1900s planer

opposite side. The Roberts bought a new German-made planer mill in 1990 that does the same job but can cut all four sides at once, which is a real time saver. Dennis said that even though there is a difference of one hundred years between the machines, the basic parts still do the same job. "The set, the hand-crank, the guards, and the concept is the same." Houston was quick to add, "But a lot safer!" The week we visited the mill they had turned out 3,500 feet of cedar tongue and groove



Houston, Dennis and Hampton Roberts at the Roberts and Sons Sawmill

paneling so the sawmill is still a viable part of the business. Hampton explained that people want cedar paneling in clothes closets to repel insects, in bathrooms because it is very moisture and rot resistant, and just because it's a beautiful wood.

Although the men still do a fair amount of custom sawing, their main business is cutting and delivering firewood around the area. Dennis designed and built a kiln out of a long refrigerator trailer from a tractor/trailer and installed a heat system to dry firewood on a big scale. Five metal bins that hold one cord of wood each are loaded into the kiln and in four days, the wood is totally dry. The internal temperature inside the kiln can reach upwards to 142 degrees when fully involved. Green wood with an 85% moisture content is reduced to 25% when fully dried. This past winter,

most of the dry firewood was delivered, unloaded at stacked at the condos at Wintergreen Ski Resort. To give an idea of how much firewood is involved, Dennis said they sold around 300 cords to Wintergreen alone. In addition, they bundle pieces for one cubic foot of firewood with a bit of small kindling and shrink-wrap the bundle, complete with a carrying handle and sell them to campgrounds and country stores in the area. In each bundle, Houston inserts a paper that says, Houston Roberts Firewood, “The perfect fire in every bundle” with the moto: *“I understand that some of life’s greatest moments often begin gathered around a campfire.”* It’s a nostalgic way of selling a product to those who enjoy the comforting warmth of an open fire. Houston said if his

calculations were correct, they went through an impressive 20,000 bundles last year!

The newest machine the Roberts purchased is called a wood processor and watching a demonstration, it’s plain to see how much time can be shaved off by using it to cut and split firewood. Large logs are picked up by a knuckleboom and loaded onto a metal landing where they are pushed forward and 15-16” pieces are cut off by a large saw. The cut round is then rammed

into a wedge that splits the round into four pieces and from there the pieces travel up a conveyor and drop into a waiting bin. Dennis said with the processor, one bin can be filled in an hour. Other equipment at the mill includes a large John Deere tractor with a bucket, a knuckleboom, and a forklift. By-products like sawdust and cedar shavings are also sold locally.

As the interview with Dennis came to a close, my husband and I were both struck at the closeness of the Roberts family. How well they work together and how respectful their conversation is toward each other. Dennis clearly loves what he does and has imparted his knowledge to their sons who continue to value the traditions of their mountain heritage.

Dennis will celebrate his 72nd birthday this August and he remains a talented, active and vital man who says, “Life is busy and I have no intention of backing off.”

Dennis at his sawmill, April 18, 2023

