

“Skylark Farm”

A Brief History of a Nelson Landmark



Beautiful Skylark Farm on the Blue Ridge Parkway, Milepost 25

For many years before I permanently moved to the community of Love, I often rode the Blue Ridge Parkway south toward Montebello and always admired the complex of formidable buildings sitting high on a hill on the left-hand side of the road. I wondered about its origin but most folks just said it was a Christmas tree farm, owned by Washington and Lee College in Lexington.

It wasn't until I moved here and started the Backroads newspaper that I became acquainted with the Humphreys; Lowell and Viola, the caretakers of the nearly 400-acre farm known as “Skylark.”

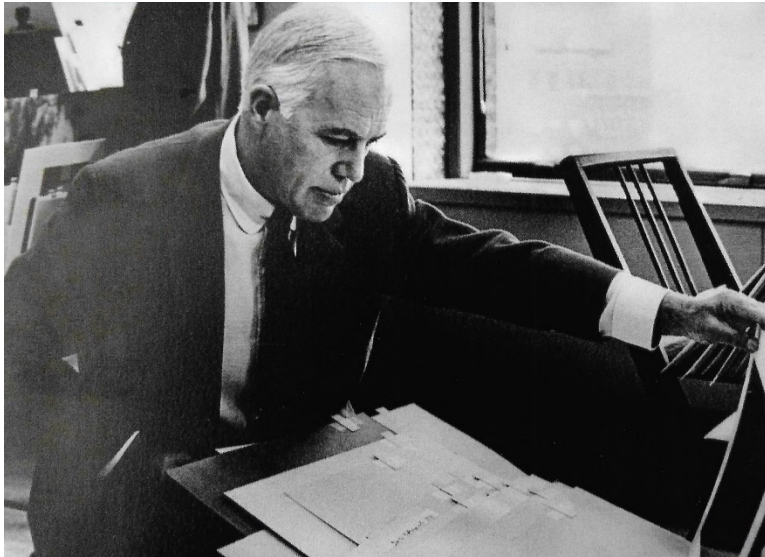
In 1987 a rumor spread about a large coyote that had been killed on Aubrey Bradley's farm, near Montebello. At that time coyotes in this part of the country were quite rare so I thought it would be an informative article for the paper. I made an appointment to talk with Lowell and drove up to Skylark where he and Viola lived.

He told me that something that spring was killing all of Aubrey's newborn lambs so one night he hid out inside the man's barn and saw what he thought was a large dog entering the structure. He shot the animal, which wasn't a dog at all, but a fifty-pound male coyote. As the talk about the coyote ended, I asked about the farm where they made their home and learned the history of Skylark.

The farm entrance, which is located on the Parkway at milepost 25, was owned by John Zink in the middle 1800s. Zink sold the property to the Fauber family who later sold it to J. K. Timmons.

In the late sixties, a man by the name of Leslie Cheek, Jr. bought the farm from Timmons and began construction of a large home on Round Top, the second highest point on the property.

Leslie Cheek, Jr. was born in 1908, the only son of Preston Leslie Cheek and his wife Mabel Wood Cheek. The Cheeks were a wealthy family from Nashville, Tennessee who made their fortune in the wholesale grocery business in the early 1900s. The Cheeks also developed a special blend of coffee named after one of the most celebrated Nashville hotels; The Maxwell House.



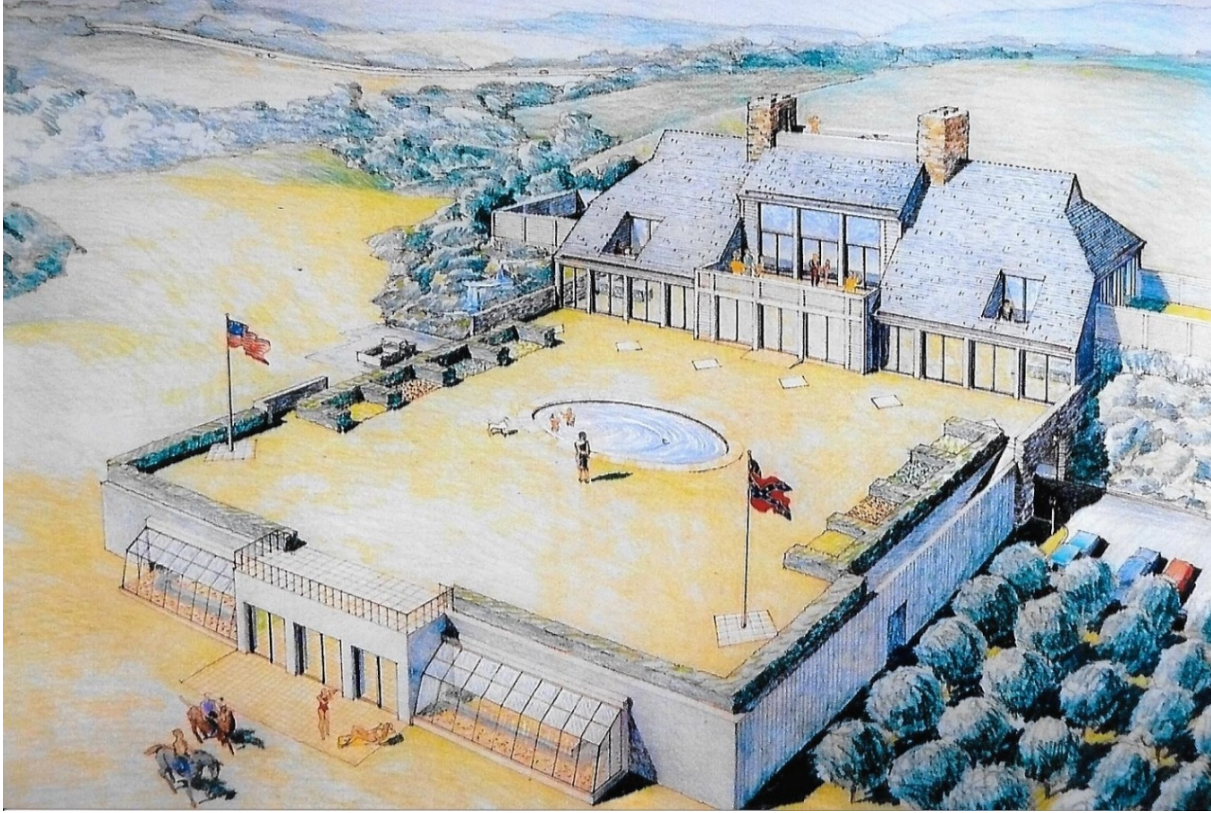
Leslie Jr. was doted on by his parents and yet was brought up with a disciplined sense of business and a high regard for good old-fashioned work. When the 1928 sale of Maxwell House Coffee to the Postum Company took place, the sale brought forty-two million dollars into the Cheek coffers. This money insured that Leslie and his younger sister, Huldah, would be independently wealthy and could pursue whatever careers that appealed to them.

Right from the start, Leslie leaned towards the arts, later going to school at Yale and Harvard to study both art and architecture. When he graduated in 1935, the Depression was raging and he could not find work. He did, however, begin teaching at William and Mary College in Williamsburg and he also became Chairman of the Fine Arts Department.

He married Mary Tyler Freeman in 1939 and in later years went on to become director of both the Baltimore Museum and the Virginia Museum in Richmond. While he was serving in the Army Corps of Engineers, he feared for his wife and their first son, on the grounds that the Germans might bomb the larger and more important cities where they lived. Plans were made to secure some isolated rural land in North Carolina where a safe haven could be built for his family to stay. And so, "Faraway Farm" was built. It remained in the family until it was sold in 1955.

In 1948, Leslie took the position of Director of the Virginia Museum in Richmond. He remained in that position for twenty years, showing the world how a small but well-run museum could bring the arts to an area which, before the 20th century, did not cultivate them.

He retired in 1968 and one year after that, plans were made to find a suitable location for a family retirement retreat. Ever since the 1955 sale of "Faraway Farm" Leslie longed for another country place. He settled on the large acreage farm near Montebello that he bought from J. K. Timmons. Cheek wanted his dream home to be built on the second highest point of the farm called Round Top, at an elevation of 3,300 feet. He hired architect Thomas Craven of Charlottesville and spent many hours going over the details of the plans.



Artist's sketch of what the large manor house was supposed to look like

This large, 3-1/2 story house would have dominated “Round Top.” From Round Top one can see into Virginia’s neighboring states, West Virginia and Tennessee.

An oval wading pool with a cascading waterfall was for the grandchildren and because of chilly mountain breezes, Cheek wanted to place the swimming pool in a below-ground gallery. Entry to the house was had by an underground driveway and an elevator would take guests to the living quarters on above-ground levels.

Along with the family’s huge manor house, the Cheeks wanted a complex of other buildings clustered around the home that would compliment the land around it. A farm manager’s home was planned along with barns, stable, and sheds for equipment and vehicles. All were to be made out of weathered gray clapboard with shingled roofs and fieldstone chimneys much like the Scotts/Irish homesteads in the vicinity.





Leslie Cheek and his wife, Mary, at their Skylark home

Fraser Fir seedlings to sell as Christmas trees in the years that followed.

The building of Skylark was planned in two phases. The first phase was to build the complex of buildings, including a three-story house. The Cheeks occupied the upper floors when they came to stay and Lowell and Viola and their son L. E. lived on the lower level.

Phase two, which would have been the building of the much dreamed about large manor house, was never to be. Because of ill health, in 1977 Leslie and his wife gave the beloved “Skylark” to the University of Washington and Lee college where Leslie had taught college and continued to sell the Christmas trees during the holidays to help defray the farm’s upkeep.

Going back to when Lowell Humphreys first became involved with the farm, he said in 1962, when J. K. Timmons owned it, he and his father Frank were hired to plow up the back part of the property for the Christmas trees Timmons wanted to plant and sell. The 365 acres was later sold to Leslie Cheek and when Cheek asked Harry Fauber, the former owner of the land, if he knew of anyone who could be hired to become the farm’s caretaker, Harry immediately thought of Lowell.



Lowell & Viola Humphreys, Skylark’s longtime caretakers

Leslie’s wife, Mary, named the new farm “Skylark.” In 1969, they broke ground and a road, well, and septic field was put in. Electric and phone lines were installed and one of the streams was dammed up to make a large pond for fishing and swimming. Skylark was meant to be productive so Lowell and Viola Humphreys of Nelson County were hired to be the farm caretakers. But instead of raising grain or animals, Leslie planted acres and acres of

The Humphreys made the move to Skylark Farm in 1970 and resided there for almost forty years. At first, they lived in the basement of a home the Cheeks had built as their summer retreat. Another separate home was built in 1977 as a private residence for Lowell, Viola, and their son, Lowell Edward, Jr. (“L. E.”)

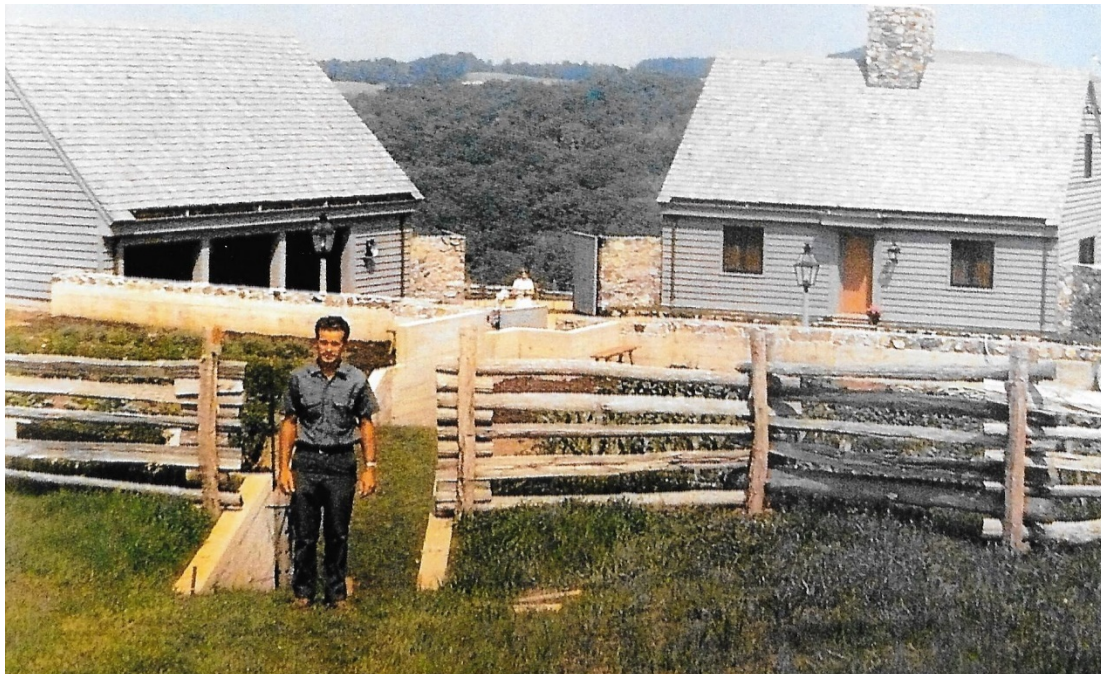
L. E. had the good fortune to be a young man surrounded by a 365-acre kingdom. He later married Kim Law, and their cozy mountain home is just across the road where L. E.’s parents now live on Painter Mountain Road.



Lowell said Mr. Cheek always had a list of things that needed to be done around the farm. One of the first things he did was fill in an old rock-lined house seat thought to be the remains of Henry Zink’s home which was located off of the main entrance of the farm from the Parkway.

The conference center, foreground & caretaker’s home to the rear

Henry was the brother of John, owner of the farm in the 1800s (see previous article on John Zink).



Lowell Humphreys pictured among Skylark’s outbuildings

From doing odd jobs around the various buildings and constructing fences, to cutting grass and trimming the Christmas trees, there was always a project needing to be done. In the early days, Viola did a lot of cooking and cleaning for the Cheeks when they came up to stay.



Lowell baling hay at Skylark Farm



Cattle grazing in the fields on the farm

As stated, in July of 1977, the mountaintop farm was given to Washington and Lee College and the Humphreys stayed on as caretakers until their retirement in 2009. The land was later sold again to a private individual and is now the home of Twelve Ridges Winery where people come to relax and take in the 360-degree breathtaking view from the large deck.

Skylark farm has had a rich history and continues to be a well-known Nelson County landmark.



Skylark Farm is now Twelve Ridges Winery with a commanding view of the mountains