

# A WOODY CREEK CHILDHOOD

BY MOLLY L. STRANAHAN

Summer in the Hunting Cabin, 1960.

I was five when we moved to Woody Creek for the summer to live in the hunter's cabin on Casady Creek. We had spent the previous several summers in Aspen. My father had bought sixty acres, ten on Casady Creek to build his dream house in the woods, and fifty across

the road on the river. Civilization in Woody Creek at the time consisted of several ranches, a number of hunting cabins, and the sawmill in Lenado. Along the Roaring Fork there was the Woody Creek Store with its gas pump and post office boxes, surrounded by the "trailer park."

The cabin was rustic: two rooms to which a bathroom had been added for our convenience. The property was improved by barbed wire fencing, essential because range cattle roamed Woody Creek all summer, and with them came cow pies, which attracted black flies.

My brothers (Patrick, then called Paddy, was four; and Mark, known as Happy, was three) and I slept in twin beds on a deck built outside the kitchen door covered with a tarp the color of Woody Creek dirt. I remember the morning I woke up to discover a cow gazing at me from two feet away. By the time my screams brought Dad rushing outside, she had wandered off. Dad told me I'd been dreaming, and that no cows had broken through the fence. Later, however, undeniable evidence of their presence was found in the form of fresh cow pies, and I was vindicated.

The cabin had no electricity. At night my parents would use a kerosene lantern, which glowed as a nightlight through the kitchen



*The oldest of George Stranahan's six children, the author is writing a memoir of her childhood in Woody Creek as a gift to her father for his upcoming 75th birthday. Inspired by the first issue of The Woody Creeker, she shares with us, beginning with this installment, the memories of a dozen years (1960-1971) in the valley as seen through the eyes of a child almost half a century ago.*

window, supplementing the stars and Milky Way. We used an old creek house, a small wooden shack built in the middle of Casady Creek, as our refrigerator. In retrospect, it must have been difficult for my 27-year-old mother, pregnant with her fourth child, to get to and from the pioneer-era creek house, but to me, a girl of five, it seemed like a summer-long camping trip. Our perspective is colored by age and responsibilities. Whether an experience is an adventure or a challenge depends on who we are at the time, and our attitude.

Just down the stream from the creek house lay a plank we used for crossing Casady Creek. Hanging from a tree next to it was a wonderful swing that carried us in long, sweeping arcs over the water. I spent many hours on that swing, imagining it was a hundred years earlier. One of our games consisted of dashing across the plank while someone was swinging, timing our runs so as not to get knocked into the creek. There were occasional missteps, which created a great excuse to go wading.

That summer, Stan Bealmer's crew was building the "big" house, which we children were forbidden to visit for safety's sake. I remember Dad telling us how he'd helped to raise the center beam, and of the

man in the crew who lost his thumb to a saw right next to what would become the kitchen fireplace. We begged to see the site of such drama, and occasionally, after the crew had departed for the night, we were rewarded with a picnic dinner at the skeleton of the future house.

Dad must have been working on his doctoral thesis at the time and meeting with people about starting the Physics Center. I recall

hearing the story of how he had approached Jack Flogaus, who ran the lumber mill in Lenado, to see if he'd be willing to split the cost of running electric wires up from the Natals' house a couple of miles down the road. Being a frugal businessman, Flogaus demurred, but as soon as the wires reached our house, he happily paid for the next leg that brought electricity to oped self-protective habits.

Cautious drivers learned to take advantage of every opportunity to peer up (or down) the road as far as possible to determine if they might encounter anyone coming the other way. If a vehicle or dust plume was spotted, one would judge where the meeting might occur, and in some places the tactic was to pull over at a wide spot to wait. There were certain curves where it was customary to honk to warn anyone coming the other way that there was an unseen peril. Defensive driving was a necessity, especially with loaded lumber trucks barreling down the road.

After that summer, we had one more winter in Pittsburgh, where I attended first grade, Stuart was born, and Dad completed his doctorate. We returned to the "big" house the next year as a family of six.