

2019

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Judi Calhoun

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Recommended Citation

Calhoun, Judi (2019) "My Time Is Short: A Woodsman Shares Hidden Treasures of the Forest With His Stepdaughter," *Appalachia*: Vol. 70 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol70/iss1/9>

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My Time Is Short

A woodsman shares hidden treasures of the forest with his stepdaughter

Judi Calhoun



THE EXPERTS SAY THAT BIODEGRADABILITY IS MEASURABLE. PLASTIC bottles and bags may take 1,000 years to decay, while natural items begin to decompose within days. From the moment a thing is born, it begins to die. My stepfather would say: “Nature is in the business of recycling nature. Man is in the business of destroying it.” As a child, I learned firsthand this sequence from birth to decay, not from any textbook but from a walk in the woods.

My stepfather Wilfred Tyler was a mountain woodsman, a living, breathing history book, and a fascinating wilderness guide if you’d been patient and lingered long enough—which I did. My eager ears strained to absorb every word, every historic exposé on this state I’d come to know as home—New Hampshire.

With great intelligence, insight, and knowledge, he could expound on fiddleheads, quaking aspens, rock formations, or rocks sculptured by time and water. Then the other things, things that could not be seen with a casual glance: ancient ancestors, ghosts, forgotten societies, people and places seemingly turning to dust before our eyes. Images that would unsettle peaceful thoughts while igniting a sense of wonder.

NATURE CHISELED MY STEPFATHER’S PROFILE TO RESEMBLE THE OLD MAN of the Mountain, and the Pennacook–Abenaki nation gave him a name—Gyp. A name distinctly defined to mean *Pain*. It rather suited my stepfather, considering his life was filled with much loss, beginning at birth with his mother’s death. A short time later his father would leave him at the doorstep of a friend who was close enough to be called family but still not.

I recall fondly one fall day when I took a walk in the woods with the old man. (He was younger back then, but always he carried the wisdom of age.) As we walked, I made sure to pay attention to the moments and places where he would pause.

In the coolness of the afternoon we found ourselves looking out from the shadows at a sun-filled clover field. Dad would reach down to pick up arrowhead stones, and when he’d stand, his face wore that faraway expression, lost in some distant memory. Most likely memories of the Pennacook–Abenaki nation, the Algonquian, and the Passamaquoddy.

With insight, the author’s stepfather could expound on rock formations, forgotten societies, and ghosts: An old rock foundation near Mount Cardigan, Alexandria, New Hampshire. CHRISTINE WOODSIDE

I knew in that moment that this place where we stood had to be special. It was, in fact, an Algonquian settlement. They'd chosen this spot because of its proximity to the Pemigewasset River. This clear-cut field (only a few steps away) offered observers an unspoiled view, an ideal hiding place to watch for prey—animals—that would provide the tribe food, clothing, and comfort.

Friends of the family would often tell the story of a white boy, a young teenager who'd left home sometime in the mid-1920s to learn of nature by traveling through the woods, only to come face-to-face with an American Indian boy around his age, and how his tribe took the white boy into their community. Tribe members taught him how to hunt. Later the family would come to understand that that boy was in fact my stepfather, Wilfred Tyler.

He bent down, his hands touching the pine-needle-covered soil. "We'd buried the blood here. We gave thanks to the Great Spirit for providing. We were so grateful." His eyes looked up at me. "Nature does not forget what you take from her."

I pondered on his words as we stood in the peaceful woods listening to the sounds of nature, hearing birds chirping, and a few leftover raindrops thudding against dark green leaves. I closed my eyes to hear the drumbeats and native chants.

Perhaps, to some hiker, this spot was nothing more than a nice view of the mountainside, but for my stepfather, this had once been home and was now a memorial.

THAT SPECIAL FEELING, A TINGLING OF EXCITEMENT, WOULD FILL ME ON those summer mornings in the early 1960s, at the beginning of our long road trips in the blue Buick Regal from Wakefield, Massachusetts, to the Lakes Region of New Hampshire. My stepfather would suddenly pull over on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, next to a field with only a few cows, to announce that he wanted to show us something. That meant whatever we were about to see was going to be *extraordinary* and something few people were privileged to view. It also meant that we would have to walk into the woods a good distance, sometimes miles.

It did not matter how many years, snowstorms, or windstorms had passed. He knew exactly how to find these hidden places. Once we'd followed him until we came upon two ancient gravestones, not a cemetery but just two granite headstones from a family that had settled and lived here in the late 1800s. The Oklahoma land rush caused many New Englanders to leave the



Judi Calhoun and her stepfather. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

hardships of winter behind and journey out west to grab land and live what they thought might be a better life.

I don't recall the names on the stones. Too many years have come and gone. What was so special about them were the two framed photos of children who died. They were monochromatic silver iodide photos inlaid with gold filigree mats and gold over wood frames, sunk deep into an expertly carved alcove at the head of each stone.

And to see them still here, and in near perfect condition after all these years, was astonishing. It wasn't the craftsmanship of the stones that mystified me, it was the children themselves—younger than me by more than a few years, dressed in plain farm clothing, no smile on their faces, no pose-for-the-camera false deportment, maybe just honest pain from standing posed for far too long.

I studied the face of the girl who had lived only ten years on this earth, and I wondered why she had died. Sadness fell over me; sad because very few people would ever come across these wonderful gravestones or even know

they'd been erected here by parents who loved their children and used what money they had to leave a memorial. To tell the world that two beloved children had lived, died, and were buried on these woodsy hills.

I rummaged around in my bag for my drawing tablet and began some quick sketches. Once back in the car, I found myself creating an imaginary story about them—one that had a much better ending for these children.

There were many more days like this, and places my stepfather would stop. Once we hiked behind him to a hidden village of rickety, tumbling-down buildings, some with trees growing right through the center and out the top of the roofs.

These sad, forgotten buildings were not empty. Some contained old trunks filled with water-damaged books, and broken picture frames with photos of strangers, old clothing matted with rotten leaves, and things I could not explain.

I was astonished to find one small house completely furnished. Logs were stacked by the stove, a rocking chair with a knitting basket on its wicker seat. It was as if the woman had gotten out of her chair and just evaporated. I swear it wasn't my imagination: The rocker moved. Maybe it was a breeze—or perhaps she hadn't left at all? Perhaps she still sat in that chair watching me from the shadows.

On the paint-peeling windowsill sat a small, rusty blue metal toy truck reflecting a pale cerulean haze on the dirt-clouded glass. I picked it up and looked it over. The wheels did not turn, but I wondered if the child had left it behind for someone. I could not take it, although I wanted to very much. It would have made a perfectly wonderful souvenir, something to remind me of this place. However, my father's rules were simple: We were not allowed to take anything. We could only respectfully observe their history, their stories lost in decay over time.

He considered abandoned places (such as they were) cemeteries without headstones, ghost towns without official records. Beneath our feet lay the bones of so many who'd once had hopes and dreams. If only they'd left a diary, we could've known what happened. What incident caused an entire village to vanish?

I AM OLDER NOW, YET OVER THE YEARS I HAVE OFTEN THOUGHT ABOUT these places, wondering if they still exist. Has time completely degenerated all remains, or have human scavengers taken what I wanted to take? Perhaps

all those grand, glorious, haunted images of paths less traveled and the ghosts of forgotten people were enough to hold as memories in my heart.

As my 20-year-old-self once wrote in that green leather diary with the gold key: *If I could tuck these adventures down deep inside my pockets, I would do so, and every so often I would take them out and as they'd shine their warm glow upon my face, I'd smile reexperiencing their loveliness and the memory of the day. Happy to have them.*

Happy yes, that all my explorations and daring escapades with my Old Man of the Mountain were more than fantastic memories; they gave me a strong desire for adventure, crafted my temperament, and defined me in ways that I am only now finding out.

Someone wise once wrote, "What's valuable arrives naturally and departs much too swiftly from our hearts." Brilliant words, and a reminder that Wilfred Tyler died much too soon. And of all his humble wisdom, he departed this world leaving behind one simple cautionary message, crudely carved into a large aging oak tree somewhere in the middle of the woods: *My time is short, leave me as you found me.*

JUDI CALHOUN is a short-story writer. Her work has appeared in *Safety Drill*, *Blue Moon*, *Literary and Art Review*, and on the fiction app *Great Jones Street*. She is currently creating a humorous collection of short stories based on her experiences as an elementary school art teacher.