moving. Somehow he pulled himself around each flat wall. You tell me how. The final trick was just friction.

He yelled out when he did that final lunge, and you heard it. You heard his voice come out of him like a scream. It brought the guards. But by then he was a free man because he disappeared from this cell.

"Where did he go, Buckley?" they asked me, looking for their missing prisoner.

I didn't know. They thought I was playing them. They asked if he had jumped over the wall in the yard.

"Where did he go, Buckley?" they asked me again.

I told them again how he did it, but I still don't know where he went. I saw him disappear with my own eyes. After he finished traversing the room, after he finished his problem, he disappeared. Wasn't anything more to it. Where is there to go? Into a shadow in this little room? He is elsewhere. He solved the problem of how to be free.

"There are only so many places to look," I said to the big-eyed team. "He's a free man."

I took out the second orange from between my legs and began unpeeling it.

After that, they finally left me alone, except for one investigator, who walked behind me and began knocking on various sections of the cell wall, first with his open hand and then a fist, trying to solve the problem.

—*Erin Connery, San Francisco, California*

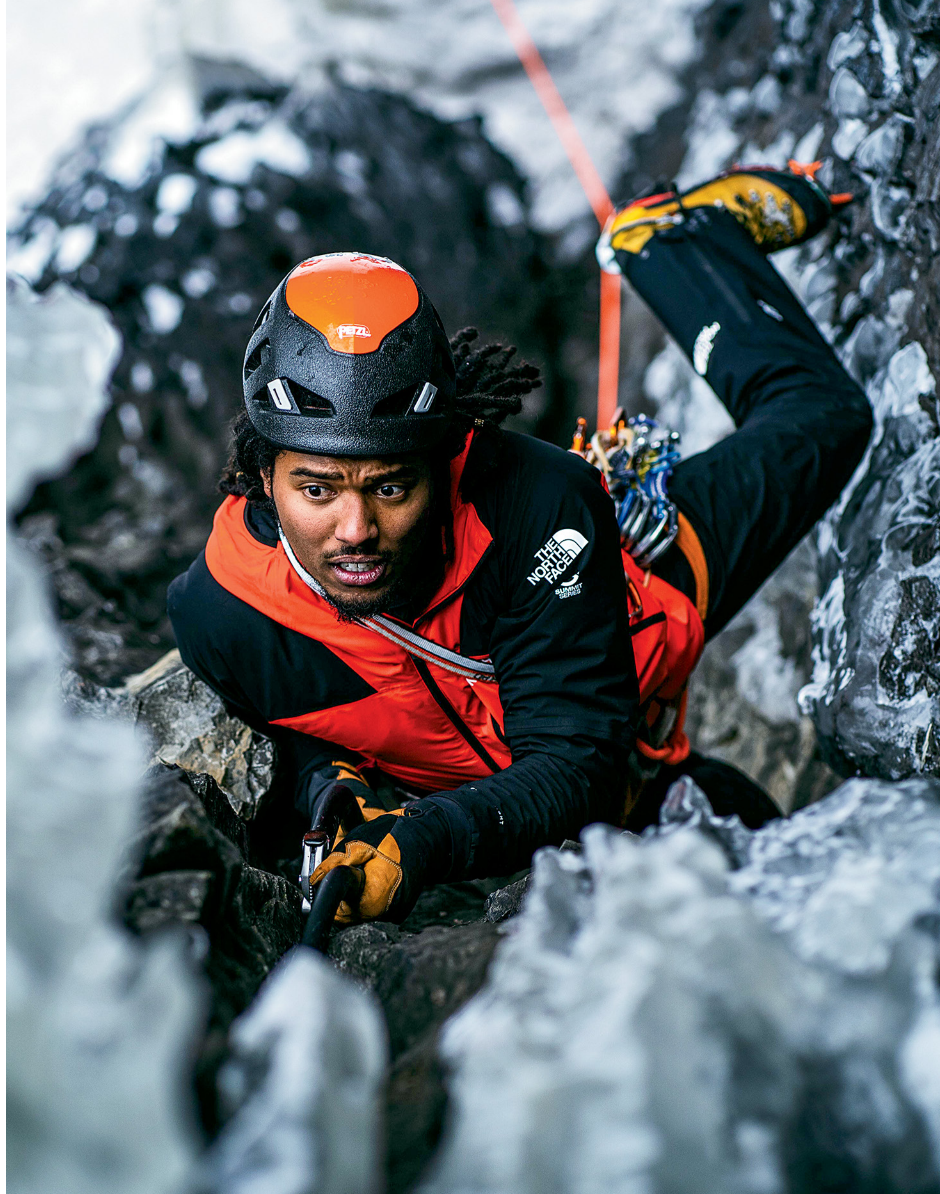

Photo: Austin Schmitz. Climber: Manoah Ainuu

Common Ground

In the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia, I'm leading a nearly seven-decade-old route called Ye Gods and Little Fishes. The line climbs a blocky corner up the south end of Seneca Rocks—a 900-foot-tall, blade-thin outcropping of Tuscarora quartzite that soars over rolling farmland dotted with tractors and hay bales. My guidebook warns that "helmets may not be protection enough" if other parties are above me. Sure enough, a baseball-sized object whizzes by and nearly hits my belayer, Arthur Kearns.

"Somebody drop a Grigri?" Arthur yells. His wife, Diane, standing nearby, scrambles to retrieve the dropped belay device. The Kearnses own a local gear shop and guide service called The Gendarme, named after a twenty-five-foot-tall pillar at Seneca that mysteriously toppled in 1987. They've loaned me a helmet for the day.

Atop the first pitch, Arthur chides me for having clipped into an old piton that he's seen rusting since he first climbed the route three decades earlier. Ancient hardware dots Seneca, some of it left behind by US Army mountaineers who trained here before their deployment to Europe in World War II. The visionaries Herb and Jan Conn are said to have scavenged for the Army's abandoned pitons while establishing some of Seneca's earliest routes. When Diane first visited in the 1960s with her dad, she pried out an old piton for show-and-tell at school.

Arthur traverses to the east face, where he and Diane were married in 1993. They'd intended to wed at the summit, but they settled for a mid-cliff exchange of vows after their preacher was overcome with vertigo. "We felt like we fell in love here," Diane says. "This place is insidious. It gets in you."

Far below our perch, the unincorporated town of Seneca Rocks appears as unchanging as its namesake rock formation. In the shadow of the peak, two byways join to create a T-intersection where two clapboard country stores are run by the same families that founded them in the early 1900s. Four decades ago in *The Washington Post*, the outdoor writer Chip Brown described seeing "a couple of service stations and general stores, a climbing shop stocked with exotic equipment you probably can't find anywhere else in West Virginia. Tourists park in the dirt triangle where the two main highways intersect, and the town has yet to get its first stoplight." There's still no stoplight. There's also no cell service, owing to Seneca being deep inside the National Radio Quiet Zone, an area where airwave communications are restricted for the sake of a major radio astronomy observatory and military station. The disconnectedness adds to an alpine-feeling environment with the scarcity of bolts, jolt of exposure and difficulty of route-finding. It doesn't hurt to know how to equalize a nut at Seneca. And to have a headlamp.

AAC member Andy Wickstrom

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Since 1902—through wars, depressions, and more—the American Alpine Club has stood to support members with public policy initiatives, education, expedition grants, emergency rescue, lodging facilities, gear discounts, and essential publications. Together we share a passion for climbing, a passion for the wild spaces and it is together that we tie in to tackle the next pitch, whatever it may hold. Turns out, there's strength in numbers. **United We Climb**.

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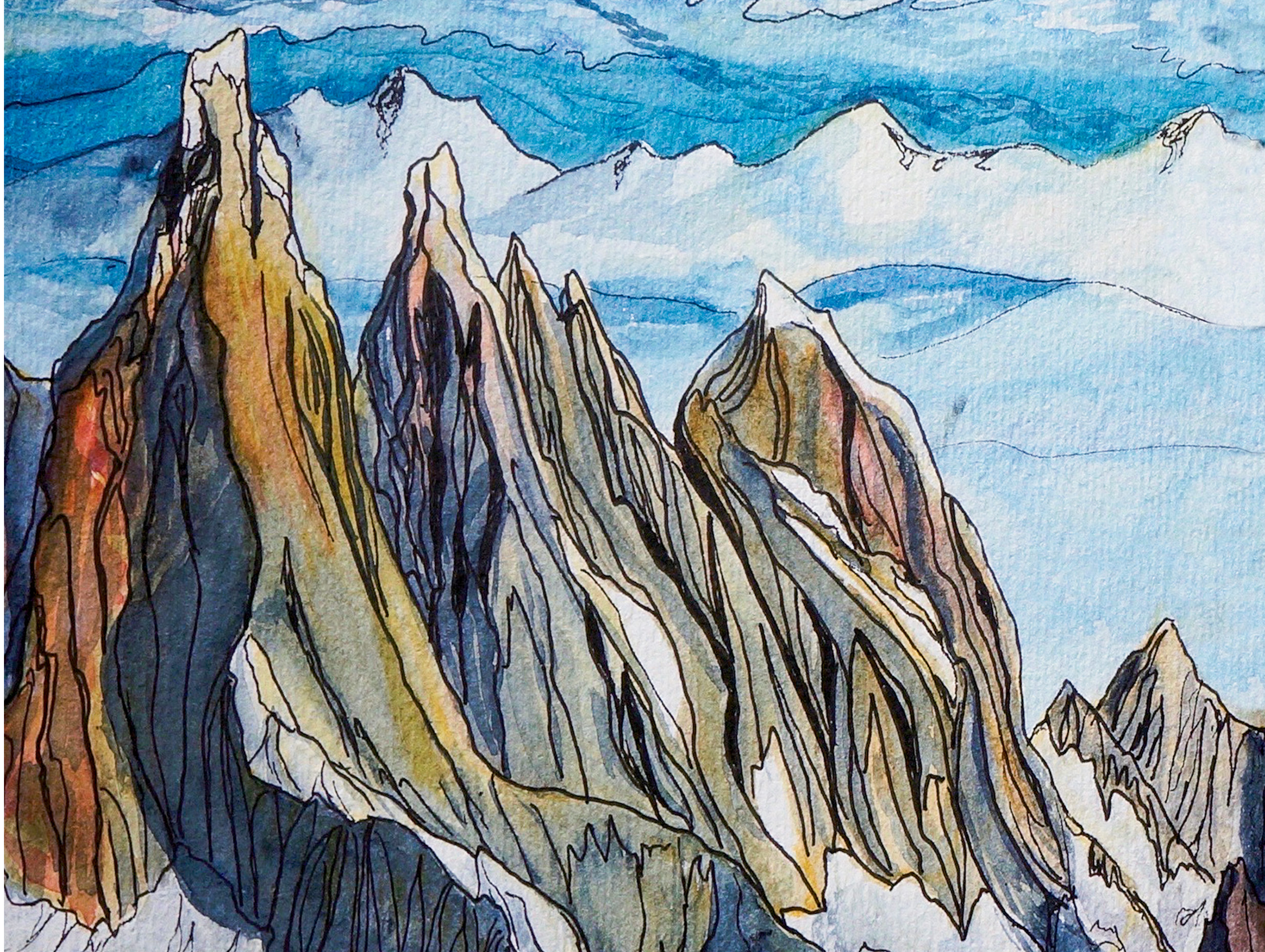
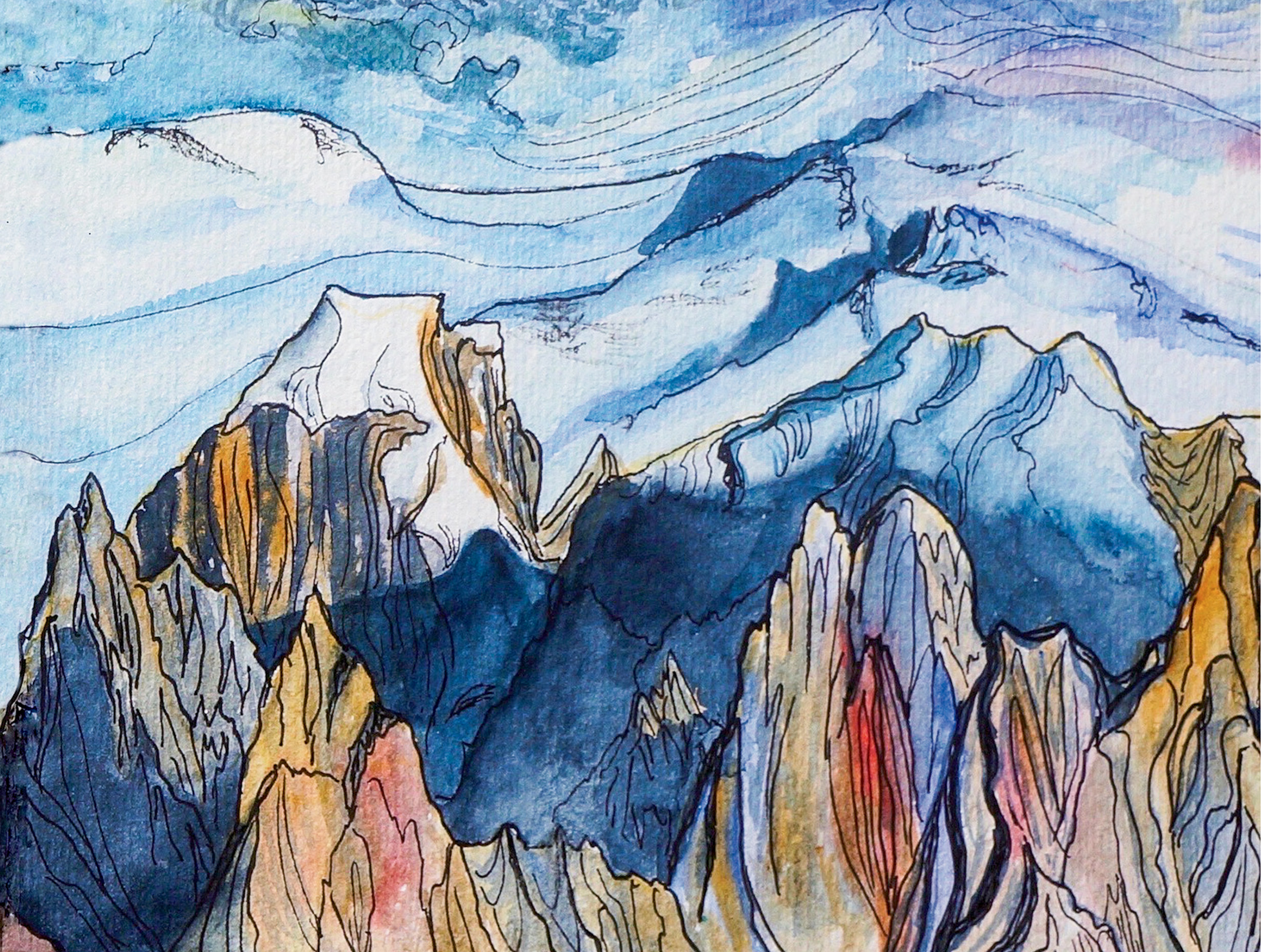


Aside from the falling rocks, what has changed about Seneca over the past half century is the way climbers like the Kearnses have become an accepted part of an Appalachian community often wary of strangers. Over years of climbing here, I've come to appreciate a nuanced portrait of a community at the intersection of farming and climbing, individualism and conservationism, provincialism and liberalism, resentment and acceptance.

In 1965 Congress established the 100,000-acre Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area within the nearly one-million-acre Monongahela National Forest. One of the first of about two dozen National Recreation Areas established across the country, its aim was to promote outdoor activities around Seneca Rocks and nearby Spruce Knob—the state's tallest peak at 4,862 feet. The area had been clear-cut in the early twentieth century, leaving behind denuded slopes prone to fires and floods that devastated farms and communities. The land recovered under the protection of the US Forest Service, and the new recreation area designation was considered a further achievement from an environmental perspective, even if cattle and sheep could continue to graze, corn and hay could be grown, and natural gas production leases could be given.

"With such a fine area as this now in public ownership, and managed in the public interest, I wonder if many people realize how close we came to losing it," Senator Robert C. Byrd said in 1965 when announcing the creation of Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area. A representative of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy called it "a precedent for future such areas throughout the United States."

In real ways, the designation would safeguard the land from private commercial development. Nearby, a privately owned ridge called Nelson Rocks has since been bolted with metal rungs and bridges to create a via ferrata where tours start at eighty dollars. Seneca remains free and largely unbolted. (The USFS advises at the trailhead, "Seneca Rocks is a traditional climbing area—think twice before drilling.") Byrd had foreseen specific threats to Seneca Rocks, later saying, "[The USFS] would not want to see someone...come in and dynamite that piece of rock and take away the main attraction from the area." He was perhaps referencing how a couple of farmers attempted to dynamite Seneca Rocks decades earlier—a story I was told by ninety-six-year-old Richard Sites, whose family has farmed the land for over a century. Another prominent local family—the Harpers, who in 1965 owned much of Seneca Rocks—had discussed erecting a giant screen to block the street view of the cliff so they could charge for the vista. Byrd's



Painting: Gabrielle Markel

comments also foreshadowed the practice of mountaintop removal, a form of strip-mining that in coming decades would level a total area larger than the size of Delaware across southern West Virginia and surrounding states.

Landowners, however, were less than thrilled about the National Recreation Area. To hear local people tell the story, bureaucrats barged into the community, banged on doors and used the power of eminent domain to bully farmers into selling their inheritance for pennies. Local opposition stalled the process for years, spurring Byrd to hold a special US Senate hearing in 1968 to hear complaints and receive a petition signed by more than nine-hundred residents and property owners, according to a transcript that I dug up in the New York Public Library. I spoke with people still alive who remember packing into chartered buses from West Virginia to deliver their petition in person at the US Capitol, highlighting the deep resentment that would linger for decades on the issue.

"It should be remembered," a civic leader named Charles Nelson testified during the hearing in Washington, D.C., "that the pioneers who carved out a great civilization in these hills and valleys and mountains did not do so through recreation and entertainment and sightseeing as a first interest, but as tillers of the soil, workers in the forest, keepers of the flock, and laborers in the mines." In other words: maybe you outsiders like to "recreate," but we're here to work. And that was one of the more restrained comments during a hearing that disregarded the Native Americans who had previously lived around Seneca Rocks—perhaps unsurprising given a still-ongoing whitewashing of the state's Indigenous history.

Shirley Yokum, a prominent businesswoman, testified that her family was "threatened with losing everything that we have worked for." Delmar Harper, owner of much of Seneca Rocks, submitted a letter saying, "We do not wish to stand in the way of progress and development of the area but we cannot accept such unheard of [buyout] values." In town, the Yokums and Harpers operated general stores that, depending on which political party was in power in Washington, housed the local branch of the US Post Office, fueling a business rivalry. Now, the Harpers and Yokums presented a unified front against Washington.

Harper sued the government in 1968 to get more than the $8,000 being offered for his seventy-three acres. He died in September 1969, leading to a belief still held by some town residents that the loss of the land precipitated the deaths of Harper and several other property owners. Three months after Harper died, a court ordered the government to pay his heirs $185,000 for Seneca Rocks—nearly $1.2 million in today's dollars.

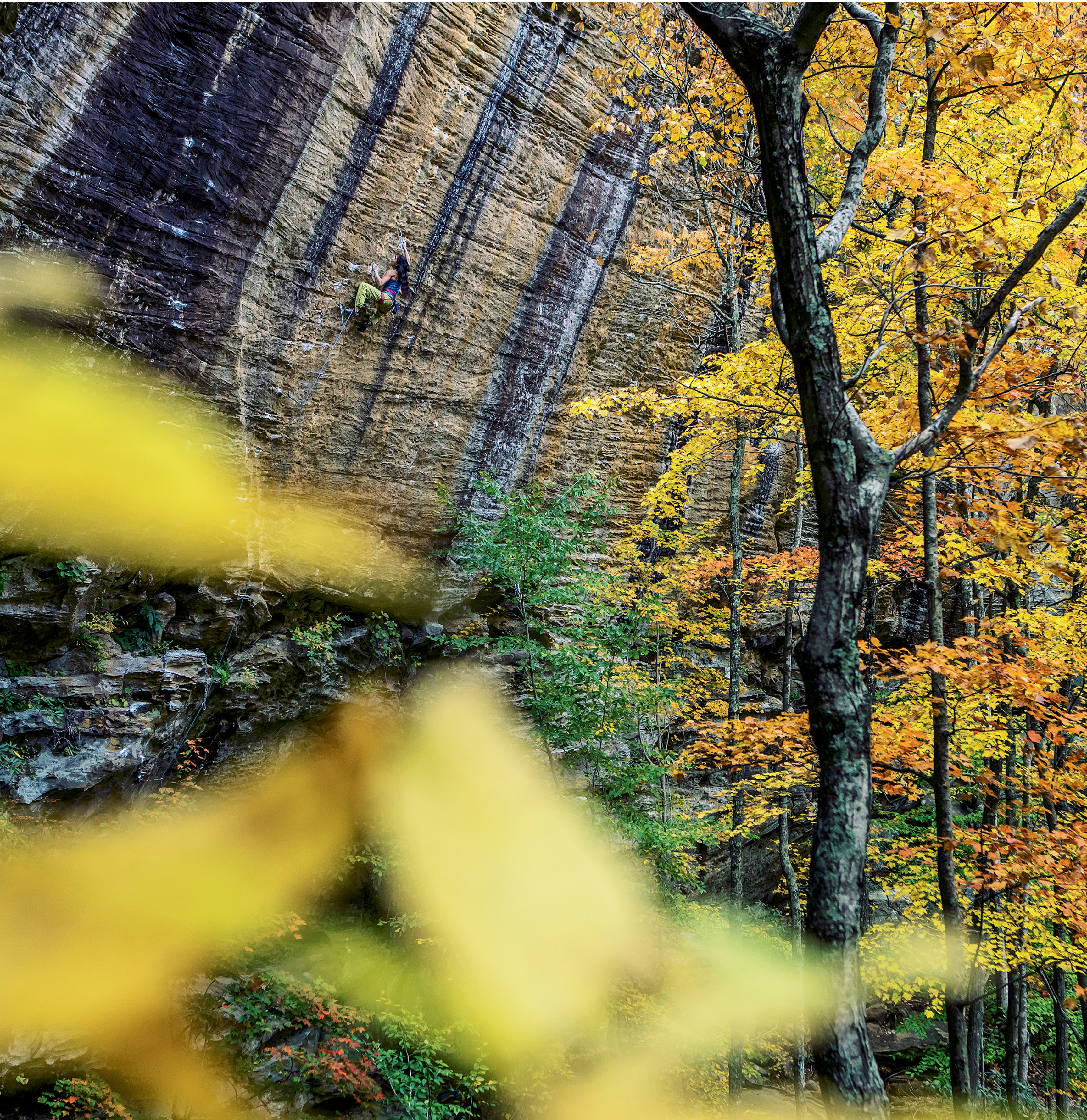


Photo: Jan Novak. Climber: Larissa Arce

Of course, overlooked in the ownership debate was how Indigenous tribes had also inhabited the land centuries earlier. The upper Ohio Valley was inhabited by the Shawnee as well as northeastern tribes from the Iroquois Nation, which included the Seneca people. Among regional tribes, the Susquehannock also left an archeological impression on the area, according to Greg Adamson, a local historian and minister. There is evidence below Seneca Rocks of two villages dating back 600 and 800 years where about 200 people from unknown tribes lived. Other artifacts date back 12,000 years.

"Seneca is sacred," said David Cremeans, president of the 4,200-member Native American Indian Federation of West Virginia. A former climber and caver, Cremeans summited Seneca's South Peak in the 1960s, and he described the stone tower as a prayer site. "Anything that was magnificent had a magical power," he said.

A large burial mound, about five feet high and twenty feet in diameter, stood in the area in front of the contemporary visitor center as recently as the early 1900s. The mound was plowed over by the grandfather of Sites, the retired farmer from one of the original families to settle the area. Back then, farmers routinely dug up Native American artifacts and remains in the fields. "There was old bones, I guess," Sites told me. Below Seneca Rocks, the USFS now maintains what is called the Sites Homestead as a museum.

Just as Congress established the National Recreation Area, a young climber from Ohio named John Markwell moved to Seneca Rocks and began selling gear out of his van at a dirt turnout. "Back then nobody had any money," Markwell recalled. "If you had a few dozen carabiners and four of each piton that Chouinard made at the time, you were in Fat City." Markwell temporarily moved his shop into a building below the rocks, only to be evicted when the land was appropriated for the National Recreation Area. He then moved into a cottage behind Harper's Old Country Store, run by Bardon "Buck" Harper—the son and heir of Delmar Harper.

An outsized personality, Buck Harper played football in college and had a famously strong handshake that would yank a person caught unawares across a room. He effectively yanked Markwell into Seneca for good by providing the permanent location for the gear shop—which he called The Gendarme and would later sell to Arthur and Diane Kearns—as well as helping him and his wife find teaching jobs. Harper enjoyed the extra foot traffic from climbers, and Markwell used Harper's crank telephone to call Chouinard Equipment in California to order more gear.

The first guidebook to Seneca Rocks appeared in 1971. That same year, clean-climbing advocate and Gunks regular John Stannard freed Seneca's first 5.11 in the Yosemite Decimial System scale (the difficult grade emerged in Yosemite around the same time). Many climbers themselves, however, had opposed creation of the National Recreation Area at Seneca Rocks in part over concerns about USFS management. Back then, the rocks were only accessible via a narrow, sagging suspension bridge and rough uphill trail. With the National Recreation Area, several footbridges were built and trails were blazed, precipitating what environmental historian Roderick Nash called "the irony of victory." By encouraging tourists to appreciate the outdoors, nature could also be "loved to death," as Nash wrote in *Wilderness and the American Mind.* Climbers also didn't like the idea of sharing Seneca with tourists. "The rocks were almost a sacred place that only climbers could venture to," recalled Ron Kirk, an Ohioan who began climbing at Seneca in the 1960s with the Cleveland Mountaineers. As alpine club president at Ohio University in the 1970s, Kirk led frequent trips to Seneca. ("Actually, too frequent," he told me. "I was a better climber than student.")

Kirk abhorred the crowds. A climbing friend of Kirk's proposed making T-shirts that would say, "Fuck the Tourists." Others allegedly hatched a plot to set fire to the government's visitor center—something that actually happened in 1992, with arson found to blame, though no charges were brought and no motives were proven. "The area surrounding Seneca Rocks was even more beautiful than it is today before the government brought in their parking lots and buildings that they said would blend right in to the surrounding," Kirk said. "I still see the whole thing as an eyesore."

The influx of tourists included an increase in climbers, which caused its own tensions. "The climbers used to be hateful and spiteful, years ago," said Wade Sites, a seventy-four-year-old farmer whose family has farmed for more than a century in the valley of Roy Gap behind Seneca Rocks. I sat in his living room, where a panoramic photo of Seneca Rocks hung on the

wall. "Back in what you call the hippie time... long hair and dirty looking and all that...they just didn't have a friendly way about them."

Climbers often parked in the middle of Roy Gap Road, blocking vehicles from crossing the North Fork South Branch Potomac River, according to Sites. He told me he once spent hours piling rocks on either side of a car that was blocking Roy Gap Road, just to teach the driver a lesson. Another time, his brother, Richard Sites, used his truck to plow an offending vehicle into the river. The USFS later built a large parking lot away from the water.

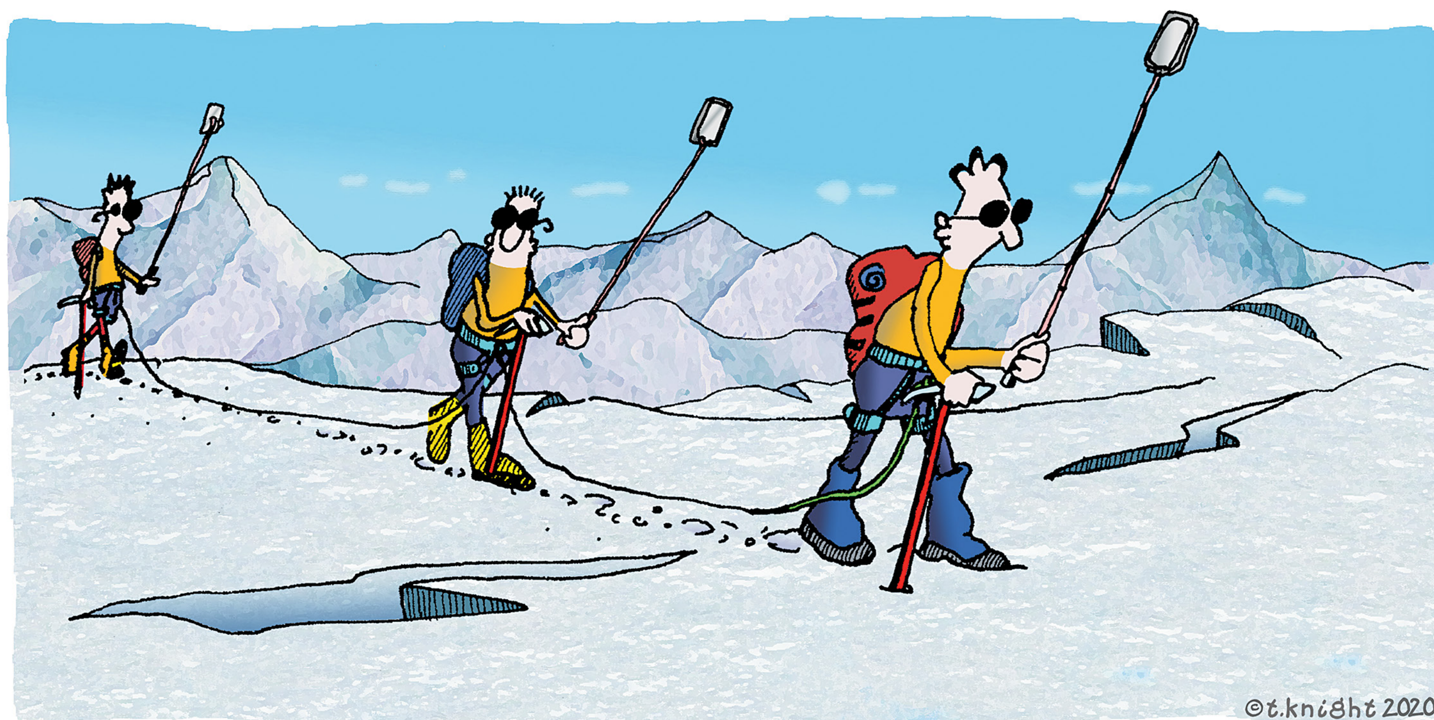
The steady presence of invested climbers slowly built relationships in the community. In 1978 Kirk moved full-time to Pendleton County, which includes Seneca Rocks, and established the climbing hardware company Colorado Mountain Industries (CMI) in the nearby town of Franklin. Meanwhile, Markwell was growing The Gendarme and, for a few years, producing a line of wedge-shaped nuts that had buyers across the country. Their investment in Pendleton County and choice to raise families in the area were two early signals of climbers trying to fit in.

Among a cast of characters to work at The Gendarme over the decades was a young Virginian named Tom Cecil, who later split to establish his own guiding company in 1990, also on land owned by Buck Harper. Once in his younger days, Cecil arrived from Virginia having forgotten his wallet. Harper loaned him twenty dollars for gas and gave him a loaf of bread and cheese.

By the 1990s, an outdoors economy was established in Pendleton County. CMI grew to employ nearly two dozen local people, making it one of the county's largest private employers. Over the decades, Kirk has donated equipment for the county's schools and community pool, underwritten an annual music festival and given to charities. Cecil, for his part, has organized climbing clinics at the high school and allowed the area's kids to climb free on his indoor wall. While Markwell has stopped climbing due to arthritis, he continues to live in the area. "I'm way more West Virginian than most people think," Markwell said with pride. "I can pee and shoot off my deck, and nobody cares. I want it to stay that way."

Climbers' economic contribution to the area built up goodwill over the decades—a trend mirrored in climbing towns across the US, said Phil Powers, longtime head of the American Alpine Club, who climbed at Seneca in the 1980s and summited the Gendarme column before it collapsed. "In the 2000s, you saw a shift in the way climbers showed up," Powers said. "From piling out the back of a car, to actually spending a little bit of money, to the degree that they're part of the local economy. When you see that happen, you see relations improve." Elsewhere in the region, climbers spend an estimated $12.1 million a year at the New River Gorge in West Virginia and $3.6 million at the Red River Gorge in Kentucky, supporting more than two hundred jobs between both places, according to the Access Fund, a climbing advocacy group.

With Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. each three hours away from Seneca, busy weekends can see the number of climbers rival the population of the surrounding community of six hundred people. There are today some 450 routes at Seneca, thanks in part to how the National Recreation Area maintained open access to climbing. Soon after his historic free ascent in 1988 of the Salathé Wall on El Capitan (Tu-Tok-A-Nu-La) with Todd Skinner, Paul Piana visited Seneca during an East Coast slideshow tour. Piana had first heard about Seneca from his early climbing mentors, Herb and Jan Conn, who had described to him a mountain in West Virginia with sheer walls and a true summit. After freeing a difficult climb on the soaring walls of El Capitan, Piana was nevertheless thrilled to get on a moderate dihedral called Triple S. "It's like being able to paint a Rembrandt by number," Piana said of climbing



Cartoon: Tami Knight

at Seneca. "You could grab the same handhold as Herb and Jan Conn or John Stannard.... It transports me back in time."

The American Alpine Club formed a Seneca chapter in 2016, highlighting the area's popularity. Over the years, Harper's and Yokum's expanded into sit-down restaurants with options that cater to the climbing clientele. Joe Harper said climbers spurred him to stock Harper's Old Country Store with energy bars and craft beer. Sam Yokum estimated that one in ten customers at Yokum's General Store was a climber; he'd added vegetarian options to his restaurant's menu for them. A banner on the front of Yokum's reads "Welcome Rock Climbers."

I FIRST CLIMBED TO Seneca's summit via a route called Gunsight to South Peak, which traverses onto the sheer west face. I was scared to the point of refusing to lead, despite the large holds and ample gear placements. A month later, I led my girlfriend (now wife) up the route. Two years later, I coached a friend through it on his first visit to Seneca. I can think of no more memorable introduction to traditional climbing.

I came to see the wrangling over Seneca Rocks reflected in the competing stories of who first reached the peak. According to a "legend" printed on tourist brochures and roadside signage, a nimble-footed Native American "princess" named Snowbird was once known to scamper along the summit ridge. She chose her husband by challenging the men in her tribe to climb with her to the South Peak, marrying the only one who didn't turn back or fall to his death. (David Cremeans of the Native American Indian Federation of West Virginia guffawed at the Snowbird story. "No tribes ever had a princess," he told me. "That's a white man's term.") The first documented ascent was in 1939 by three men from the Washington area: Paul Bradt, Don Hubbard and Sam Moore. At the summit, they found the initials "D.B." engraved with the year 1908. The inscription may have been carved by a local surveyor, according to The Seneca Project, an online archive of the climbing history. According to Joe Harper, the initials were actually "D.H.," for his grandfather Delmar Harper, who had once owned much of Seneca Rocks.

"My grandad was the first known man to make the summit, and he did it without ropes or anything," Harper told me. An unlit cigar bounced on his lip. We were chatting inside Harper's Old Country Store, under the eye of a six-foot-tall, taxidermied black bear that held the sign, "Killed by Joe Harper, May 17, 1983. Reason: Killing Sheep." I read in Harper's attitude an effort to retake control of the narrative around Seneca Rocks. He'd seen climbers claim to "discover" the peak and "find" all its routes. They even renamed a column of rock as the Gendarme rather than calling it the Chimney, as local people had long done, Harper said.

Such wariness of outside perceptions and outsider interests feeds into still-lingering resentment about the federal seizure of Seneca Rocks a half-century ago. On behalf of the Access Fund, which partners with private landowners to purchase and protect threatened climbing areas, Seneca Rocks Mountain Guides owner Tom Cecil once offered to pay a nearby property owner to allow climbers to access another fin-like rock band called Champe Rocks. The landowner, a Harper, declined.

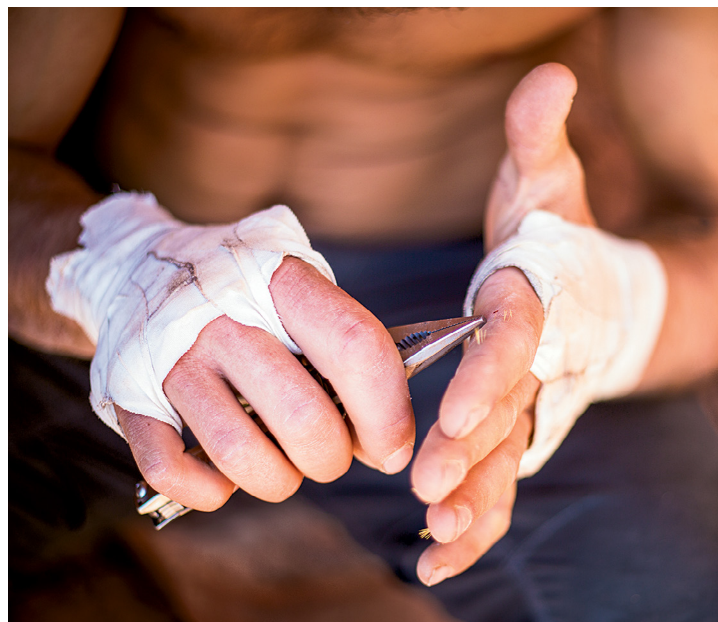
"The North Fork Valley could be a paradise of rock climbing," said Cecil, ticking off the names of a handful of prominent cliffs in the area. "But [the landowners are] all people who don't want to sell to out-of-towners. And it's related to the eminent domain case."

And yet, if anyone is going to negotiate for these regional crags to be opened, it will be the established Seneca climbers who are aware of the area's history, said Zachary Lesch-Huie, regional director for the Access Fund. Elsewhere in Appalachia, the good relationship between the climbers and local people saved one of the region's most popular climbing areas from oil exploration. At the Red River Gorge in Kentucky, the Murray family sold 750 acres in 2004 to the Red River Gorge Climbers' Coalition rather than taking a higher offer from an oil company. "The relationship between the family and climbers made a very real difference," said Lesch-Huie. "And the story repeats itself."

If there's a takeaway from Seneca Rocks, it's that of coming together and slowly dismantling stereotypes through a shared appreciation for the land. On warm weekends, Seneca is a relatively vibrant, bustling crossroads, with climbers from around the East Coast rubbing elbows with West Virginians who opposed the original creation of the recreation area. They exchange pleasantries. They talk. They sometimes climb together.

"I think anytime you have a mixing, you have a better understanding of what the other side sees," said Sam Yokum, whose mother testified at the 1968 Senate hearing to protest the creation of the National Recreation Area. He and I were sitting on a bench outside Yokum's General Store, looking up toward Seneca Rocks. "If you don't have that outside influence, I think you become nearsighted, like a horse with blinders on."

That optimistic note suggests a way forward for other lands where competing ownership claims have challenged preservation and management plans. As Joe Harper put it to me,



"You find common ground through the rocks, the trees, the woods."

Harper died earlier this year at age seventy-eight. In his life, he climbed once to the summit of Seneca's South Peak, adding his name to a logbook stashed inside a metal canister on the narrow summit ridge, hundreds of feet above the farmland where his family has raised sheep for ten generations. Afterward, he was content to donate a new spiral notebook whenever the climbers' log was full.

Harper's widow, Carolyn, told me she'll continue whatever traditions her husband had with climbers, including donating the summit log. Somebody just has to come in and ask, she said.

—Stephen Kurczy, New England

Photo: Seth Langbauer. Climber: Hamilton Holland