A Special Story In and About a Special Place

John Brown—Cleveland, South Carolina

There is a tradition of storytelling in the mountains of the Carolinas that dates back to the days when Native Americans preserved their heritage by repeating the stories handed down from generation to generation. One such story is the tale of how the Cherokee Nation obtained fire. According to the legend, only the Thunders had fire until one day they sent lightning down and started a fire in a sycamore stump on an island in the river. The animals knew it was there, because they could see the smoke coming out at the top, but they could not get to it on account of the water, so they held a council to decide what to do.

Every animal that could fly or swim wanted to be the one to go after the fire. The White Raven offered to go. Because he was so large and strong they thought he could surely bring back the fire, so he was sent first. He flew high and far across the water and alighted on the sycamore tree, but while he was wondering what to do next, the heat scorched his feathers black and he was frightened and came back without the fire.

The Screech-Owl volunteered to go, and reached the place safely, but while he was looking down into the hollow tree stump a blast of hot air came up and nearly burned out his eyes. He managed to fly home as best he could, but it was a long time before he could see well, and his eyes are red to this day. Then the Hoot Owl and the Horned Owl went, but by the time they got to the hollow tree the fire was burning so fiercely that the smoke nearly blinded them, and the ashes carried up by the wind made white rings about their eyes. They had to come home without the fire, but they were never able to get rid of the white rings.

The birds decided that they would not be successful, so the White Racer Snake said he would go through the water and bring back some fire. He swam across to the island and crawled through the grass to the tree, and went in by a small hole at the bottom. The heat and smoke were too much for him, too, and after dodging about blindly over the hot ashes until he was almost on fire himself he managed by good luck to get out again at the same hole, but his body had been scorched black. He has ever since had the habit of darting and doubling on his track as if trying to escape from close quarters. He came back without fire, also.

Now they held another council, for still there was no fire, and the world was cold. The birds, snakes, and four footed animals all had some excuse for not going, because they were all afraid to venture near the burning sycamore. Finally, Water Spider Kanane'ski Amai'yehi said she would go. She was not the water spider that looks like a mosquito. Kanane'ski Amai'yehi is the large one, with black downy hair and red stripes on her body. She can run on top of the water or dive to the bottom, so there would be no trouble getting over to the island. The Council of animals asked her, "How could she bring back the fire?"

"I'll manage that," said the Water Spider; so she spun a thread from her body and wove it into a tusti bowl, which she fastened on her back. Then she crossed over to the island and through the grass to where the fire was still burning. She put one little coal of fire into her bowl, and came back with it, and ever since we have had fire, and the Water Spider still keeps her tusti bowl.

There is a large soapstone rock (original weight on the order of seventeen tons) which was transformed by Joel Queen, a local Native American artist, into a representation of the story of the First Fire. It is prominently located near the main office building, on the roof garden at the Southern Highlands Reserve. The accompanying picture shows the water spider on the top of the rock above the working fireplace which represents the sycamore stump holding the First Fire. The other animals occupy a supporting role in the sculpture.

The sculpture, "First Fire," is an example of the attention to detail, authenticity, artistry, and being one with nature so essential to the mission of the Southern Highlands Reserve. It is a private, non-profit institution dedicated to the preservation, cultivation, and display of plants native to the Southern Appalachians. Open to academics and horticultural professionals, the 120-acre reserve is located at an elevation of 4,500 feet at the summit of Toxaway Mountain. A 20-acre Core Park of display gardens features the Azalea Walk (Gregory Bald azaleas), the Vaseyi Trail and Pond, the Wildflower Labyrinth (late summer meadow species), and the Woodland Glade. Of special interest is the newly completed roof garden.

Surrounding the Core Park is a 100-acre natural area with rock cliffs, waterfalls and seeps, and perhaps the world's largest natural stand of *R. vaseyi*. A well-maintained trail system featuring artistic originality in wood and iron traverses both woodlands and cliffs.

The Southern Highlands Reserve is a special place in every aspect of its existence. John Turner, Reserve executive director, explains that there are at least three different inputs to the design of the gardens that have been melded into a wonderfully pleasant place to spend time—either an afternoon or a career. The Reserve consulted with a landscape architect, and his input is seen in the more formal areas of the garden.

"Our landscape architect is Gary Smith, a renowned public garden designer who specializes in designs that educate and connect people to nature. Gary is mainly responsi-

Photo John Brown

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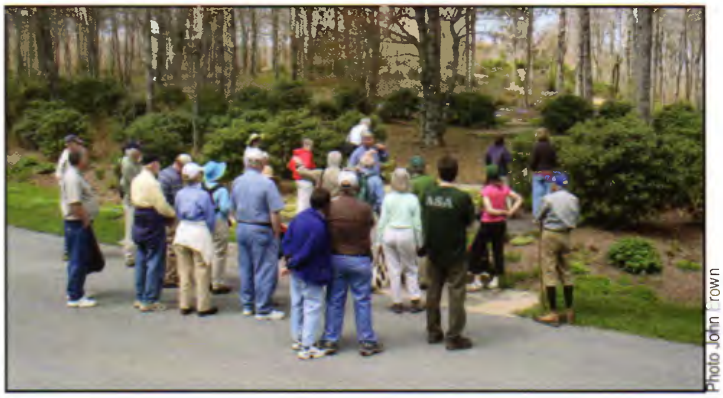

Photo John Brown

► A group of convention attendees prepare to tour the Southern Highlands Reserve.

ble for the Woodland Glade, the Wildflower Labyrinth and the Azalea Walk. Although the whole place is a collaboration. Gary also did Pierce's Woods at Longwood Gardens, the children's garden at Winterthur and the new master plan at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center," said Turner.

John supplied a less formal approach with casual views and walks. The local artisans and notably Equipment Engineer Jack Owen, who was tasked with placing the large stones, each contributed their own knowledge with emphasis on the rustic beauty of the area. The story about Jack is that on his first day, everyone wanted to supervise and give him detailed instructions. On the second day, everyone wanted to watch his work. For the rest of his time there, he was left to create on his own with only a general outline of where the project was headed.

Turner said, "I would describe him as an artist with native boulders with a master engineer's sense of how to handle large, heavy objects. The plaque we have prepared to put on one of the rocks in his memory simply says artist, engineer, friend."

The craftsmanship throughout the Reserve is evident at each turn. Walkways and bridges across streams are hand-crafted in such detail as to be works of art at each bend in the trail. There is one stretch of wooden walkway that was observed to be "crooked as a snake." Shortly thereafter, the workman added a snake's head and tail to the section of walkway.

The exterior siding on buildings is made from yellow poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) bark, a use of local materials dating back more than 100 years. The "shingles" give the building a sense of belonging unachievable with other materials and are said to last for generations.

This is the special place visited by the ASA Convention Tour group. A Sunday morning trip along the Blue Ridge escarpment brought the group to the Reserve in time to whet our appetites with a preview of the day's events. A catered lunch beyond the Vaseyi Walk and trout pond on the

Photo John Brown

▲ John Turner, executive director of the Southern Highlands Reserve, speaks to the tour group.

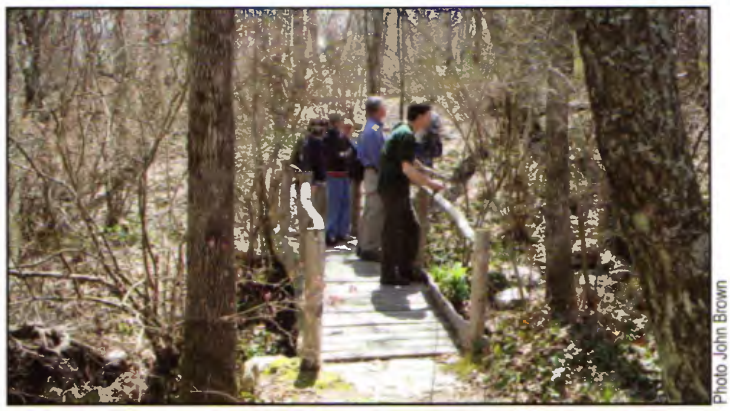

Photo John Brown

▲ Convention attendees exploring the glade.

manicured lawn with an overlook framing the major North Carolina mountain peaks energized the group into three teams of explorers.

The largest—and youngest—group followed **Richard Bryson** up and down across the cliff faces to and beyond waterfalls and seeps. The outward view yielded a view of the Blue Ridge escarpment from Toxaway Lake to Lake Hartwell and beyond. Close up, the view included the underside of fallen rock as the trail crawled along the mountainside passing lichens, orchids, mosses, azaleas, kalmia, and innumerable groups of plants.

A fortunate few followed **Dick Bir** around the 20 acres of the Core Park picking tidbits of knowledge from his vast experience. Although The Reserve has been in existence for about six years, the hardscape would have you believe it had been there much longer. Plant size also fails to expose the age since the gardens have been woven into the natural landscape.

The third group hiked toward the peak of Toxaway Mountain into the *R. vaseyi* colony. These plants, located as expected on the north face of the mountain, stretch to heights of 15 feet and more under a sparse hardwood cover. When I asked how far along the trail the colony ran, the answer came back "All the way to the end of the mountain, several miles."

The trail is deliberately underdeveloped to avoid any unnecessary encroachment on the area and plants. It is a one-lane trail, making passing difficult and group discussions nearly impossible. The group took the situation as a challenge and overcame the limitations by repeating stories back along the trail and leaning on tree branches to see forward and backward. We found the *vaseyi* in tight bud to slightly open, giving us a hint of the bloom set for the year (moderate).

Thus was the snapshot available to a small group (about 30) of the 2008 Convention tours. The Southern Highlands Reserve has just begun to open its wonders to a select few and the Society was privileged to be among the first. The Vaseyi Chapter members, who refrained from taking tour slots on the May 4 trip, were invited back on May 9, and were able to include guests from the Mountain Horticultural Research Extension Station in addition to extension agents from other areas. Every guest of the Reserve came away a richer person for the experience.

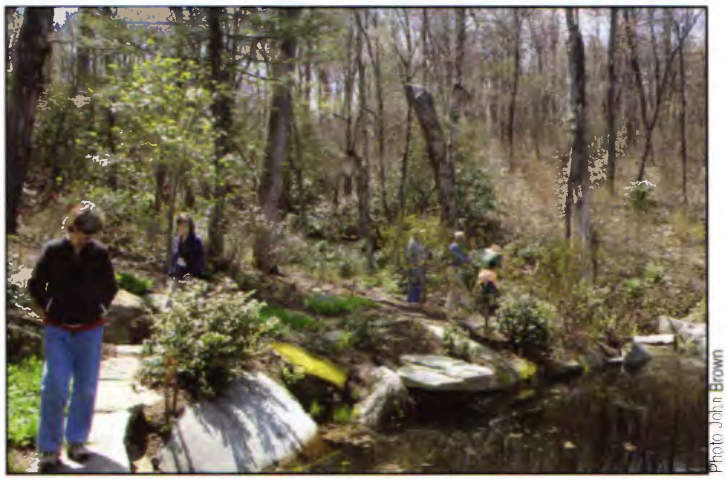

Photo John Brown

▲ Walking by the trout pond.

▼ Lunch on the edge.

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John Brown *is currently serving as Society President and attempting to establish a new garden in an old forest.*