

## TRAVELS WITH GEORGE MASA

Alice H. Hart  
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My travels with George Masa began as Bill shared his Smoky Mountain hikes with accounts of Masa Knob and Mt. Kephart. I was enthralled as he shared stories about George Masa, this enigmatic, mysterious Japanese photographer and a founder of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. From those early times, Bill spoke of his desire to tell Masa's story, something almost palpable. Years earlier, when we hiked to Charlies Bunion, I viewed Masa Knob in the distance for the first time. This experience motivated my own interest in the quest to know Masa.

Once Bill made that decision, his passion and mine became a promise to Masa that together we would honor his legacy and tell his story in the numerous ways that have unfolded. As Bill wrote and I read each line and we talked, both of us began to feel an intimacy with George Masa, even to the extent we shared tears of remembrance as we devoted our time to further Masa's legacy. When Bill's story of Masa was published in Robert Brunk's book, *May We All Remember Well*, Masa suddenly belonged to everyone throughout the community and beyond, inspiring an interest and deeper understanding.

After many years of attending Kephart Days in Bryson City, we became friends with George and Elizabeth Ellison and Libby Kephart Hargrave, great granddaughter of Horace Kephart, and other members of the Kephart family. This friendship with Libby resulted in an invitation from her for Bill to be among the first outside their family to view the large unknown collection of Masa photos that had been stored for years. After viewing the photos, Bill came home emotional that this amazing collection had been preserved. As he shared what he had witnessed, he was captivated and overwhelmed as was I. From that time on, the Masa story unfolded almost daily in our lives and in those of others.

After viewing Masa's images, I began to see the mountains with new eyes and envisioned painting mountain ranges with my watercolors. When Bill and I drove on the Blue Ridge Parkway and in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, we frequently encountered vistas reminiscent of scenes photographed by Masa. He often photographed distant mountains, framed by tree branches, a single tree, and clouds he seemed to capture at perfect moments as they dramatically hovered over the mountain ranges. Many times Bill stopped for me so I could pause at overlooks and attempt to capture these scenes before me with photos, and later in my studio as I painted with my watercolors. As I paused there, I thought of Masa and how he might wait for hours to capture the images we see today. These images are preserved and are a tribute to Masa's legacy, his artistry, his devotion to preservation, and his contributions as a founder of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.