

“More Walk, Less Talk”

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I’ve taken a meandering trail in getting to “know” George Masa. Initially, I “met” him through the Smokies and later through his friends. In the mid-1970s, four of us—my husband, his brother, my friend, and I—set off on week-long backpacking trips in the Smokies. My husband had a well-thumbed copy of Kephart’s *Camping & Woodcraft* and on one of our hikes we stopped by the millstone that marked Kephart’s last camp. Over the years, Kephart and I got to know each other pretty well. I began researching Kephart’s life when I was a grad student, studying to be a librarian (Kephart’s profession); continued to dig into archives at Kephart’s alma mater, Cornell University (where I worked); his family lived in Ithaca (where I had moved), etc. Eventually, I met George Ellison and we teamed up to write *Back of Beyond: a Horace Kephart Biography* (2019).

But, one cannot write a biography of Kephart without understanding his congenial comrade, George Masa. In delving into Masa’s life, I joined a Society of Masa Admirers who became my community. I read Bill Hart’s seminal article, “The Best Mountaineer” and watched Paul Bonesteel’s film, “The Mystery of George Masa.” I dug into archives at Pack Memorial Library, Western Carolina University, University of Tennessee, McClung, the Biltmore, etc. At a Kephart Days celebration, I was in a cabin when Libby Kephart Hargrave, great grand-daughter of Horace Kephart, opened a box filled with Masa’s photographs, a cache she later donated to the Great Smoky Mountains Association. This group of Masa fans generously shared their archives, their homes, and their knowledge with me.

I also learned about Masa through his friends—not only my contemporaries who became my friends—but through Masa’s contemporaries. Kephart was astonished that Masa

(not even naturalized, so far as I know) should have done all this exploring and photographing and mapping, on his own hook, without compensation but at much expense to himself, out of sheer loyalty to the Park idea and a fine sense of scenic values. He deserves a monument.

Masa’s other friends, some at the national level, including Arno Cammerer (National Park Service) and Myron Avery (Appalachian Trail); others at the local level, e.g., Barbara Ambler Thorne, George McCoy, Margaret Gooch, thought just as highly of Masa. J.S. Holmes, the NC State Forester, wrote that Masa was “one of the finest assets Western North Carolina has.” Masa died in the midst of the Depression yet his friends, struggling themselves, gathered money to cover the \$57.75 funeral expenses—including \$1 from newspaper editor D. Hiden Ramsey; \$2 from Blake Creasman (Masa lived with the Creasman family in the early 1920s and Blake worked with him in the studio); civic leaders George McCoy and George Stephens; \$5 from Verne Rhodes who chaired the NC Nomenclature Committee; \$10 from W.W. Dodge, a prominent

silversmith, architect, and one of Masa's clients; and \$4.75 from members of the Carolina Trail Club. Fourteen years after Masa's death, the Carolina Mountain Club raised enough funds to mark his grave. Nearly thirty years after George Masa's death, CMC members finally succeeded in their quest to have the U.S. government recognize Masa's contributions to his adopted country. That monument which Kephart felt Masa deserved is a 5,685 feet peak named Masa Knob. Ninety years after his death, a new generation celebrated his achievements with the installation of a North Carolina Historical Marker in Asheville.

Masa had cast a long shadow. His friend George Stephens wrote that "recognition when clearly deserved spurs others to high public service. . . . The good that it [honoring George Masa] can do will reach people around the world. It can say that all men are brothers when they work to preserve the beauty of Nature."

Paul Bonesteel and I are completing a full-length biography of George Masa which will be published in 2024 by the Great Smoky Mountains Association. George Masa has helped me survive these past few years. Researching his life during the COVID-19 pandemic years grounded me and gave me purpose. Not only did Paul and I work together but we had a team of researchers on the west coast and in Japan who deepened our understanding of the man we know as George Masa. When my wonderful husband, Boj Kibbee, was diagnosed with mesothelioma in 2021, Masa's dedication and perseverance inspired me. The informal Society of Masa Admirers became a community who supported me after my husband's death.

George Masa's life, in many ways, is an immigrant's story. He arrived in the United States without family or significant funds. He faced discrimination and anti-Asian legislation limited his civic life. Despite these hurdles, he succeeded professionally. The Vanderbilts, the Stephens, the Dodges, the Seelys—all prominent Asheville families—hired him for his photographic skills. Myron Avery used one of Masa's photos to illustrate his *Scientific American* article on the Appalachian Trail.

But it was Masa's long shadow that intrigued me. As people learn his story, each new generation is awed by all the "exploring and photographing and mapping" that Masa did out of "sheer loyalty to the Park idea." I savored my first whiff of a tulip poplar blossom in the Smokies while hiking up a steep trail. My olfactory experience was enabled by people, including Kephart and Masa, who fought to protect the towering trees and create the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

My husband and I were avid hikers and we enjoyed exploring the natural areas in our upstate New York backyard. Masa's mantras, "More walk, less talk" and "off your seats and on your feet" inspire me when inertia, cold weather, laziness, or loneliness conspire against me. When I spot a painted trillium in a Finger Lakes Land Trust protected area, I am reminded of the profusion of wildflowers Boj and I first saw in the Smokies and am grateful for the continued dedication of people today who protect our environment. When we work together "to preserve the beauty of Nature" we are all connected—whether we live in North Carolina, Japan, or upstate New York.