

## **My Discovery of George Masa**

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The ritual was then as it is now. Wake up, put coffee on, walk out and get the newspaper. A rolled up, paper thing printed the night before or in the early morning hours. It's put into someone's car and then tossed onto the driveway about 5 am. One morning I unrolled it and saw an Asian man sitting on a go-cart.

As I now know, there had been a constant stream of George Masa mentions in the *Asheville Citizen-Times* throughout the 1990s from the likes of John Parrish, George Ellison, Ben Porter and Bob Terrell, along with numerous mentions of Bill Hart's article "The Best Mountaineer" published in Robert Brunk's regional anthology *May We All Remember Well*. But my first contact with Masa was Rob Neufeld's article in January of 2000. Rob's story was alluring, including photos and several follow-up articles with more photos, as Pack Library had begun to organize images received from the Creasman family—images which included Masa. I was immediately intrigued and was soon at Malaprop's Bookstore buying the Brunk book. Next came a conversation with Bill Hart, where I explored the typical questions: "Where can I see more? What more do you know? Who else should I talk to?" Bill gave me some ideas and said, "I feel like I only scratched the surface of the Masa story."

That point in my life was an interesting one. I had left a very busy and established career and social scene in Atlanta, Georgia a few years earlier to move to Asheville with my pregnant wife to explore the possibilities of making films and media there. In early 2000, we were still deeply wounded by the loss of our infant daughter in 1998, and I was spending much time in the woods, along streams and on mountain trails while fishing, biking and hiking—searching for my new identity. I had, temporarily, lost who I was. My role as a father had been cut short. My role as husband unclear. And my future as a filmmaker undefined as well. Masa's story and the unknowns he faced seemed to align with my own.

Even though I had made five documentary films in the 1990s, I felt like there was for me a new kind of film to make, still so much to learn and express that I had not touched yet. And certainly, the mysterious aspects of Masa's life compelled me to investigate. I also saw the possibilities of telling a story about him that could say some of the things I felt about nature and wilder places that I'd been trying to articulate in some way. The more I learned, the more intrigued I became. It also became clear that in learning his story I was learning the backstory on Asheville and the region, its history and its people. It was important for me to learn these things, both professionally and personally. I also began to see the connections in the natural world to the economy and to the long-held attraction of the area. By that time, we had been doing video work for the Chamber of Commerce, Biltmore Estate and Grove Park Inn—organizations and places Masa had photographed. All this contributed to my desire to pursue his story.

The other thing I think about is my attraction to old things. When I was a pre-teen living in Flat Rock, NC there was a pre-Civil War estate about a mile from our house. It was (and still is) a phenomenal place with Frederick Law Olmsted landscaping and a central house in some sort of Colonial style that was in a state of decline, but still had livable rooms which were sometimes inhabited. It was surrounded by the remains of another time. Tennis courts, a concrete swimming pool, a creek house built with huge cut stones, along with outbuildings that had housed enslaved labor and extended family. Most memorable was a carriage house containing four elaborate horse-drawn carriages, all soon to be destroyed by a collapsing roof. We kids would explore, dodging behind pine trees when we heard car wheels on the gravel road or heard a dog bark. Only once did we come face to face with the person living there, and we sprinted on Little League Baseball legs into the trees and rhododendron, where only we knew how to navigate. Within the outbuildings were papers, photos and artifacts, mostly from the 1920s-1950s. One of the houses contained scattered medical records of people who were long since dead and gone. There, for me, in my ten-year-old mind, was a place where my imagination was fueled by these artifacts and scraps of personal history. I think this was when I fell in love with history, not in an academic way, but in a deeply intimate way.

Years later when I was in high school, we would sometimes go into downtown Asheville, in pursuit of thrift store clothing in an attempt to be more punk rock or alternative in some manner. In those years downtown Asheville was a hodgepodge of derelict and boarded storefronts, old businesses that had not faded or moved, one big semi-modern building and many older ones clearly from another time, but not loved or respected for that fact yet, merely holding on. Amidst law firms and a few aging movie theaters, we would wander in and out of stores where I'd sometimes see black and white photos on the walls or in bins of "junk." These were mostly portraits of people, with an occasional group shot or nature scene. Again, I was transported into another time and life.

So when Rob Neufeld began to explain one source of some of these images, it tapped a place in my brain and experiences that fired synapses waiting to be excited. And excited they were. Seeing the photo of George Masa on the go-cart, on what was clearly a hand-crafted machine, and the accompanying story that he had lived with a local family for a time, was one of the things that propelled me into research of Masa. The look on Masa's face and imagining what it must have been like to have been him had a big effect on me. As I met people and interviewed a few individuals who had had some personal interaction with him, albeit limited, I was enthralled at the realization of how time and people's lives are connected. I began to understand the true meaning of 100 years, and how, if you stack these on top of one another, you have a somewhat better sense of the history of mankind itself.

The research led to the creation of *The Mystery of George Masa*, a documentary film finished in 2002 and released on PBS in 2003. The film has been screened many times

at film festivals and other group settings. With Janet McCue, I'm working on a biography of Masa which will soon be published.

George Masa and his life has inspired and fascinated me. My life has been enriched and blessed by the people who have also been inspired by Masa and that is another significant testimony about who he was and what he accomplished. Masa motivated me to learn his story, yes, but also many other important stories from this region. It is a place with many layers and personalities.