

## I DON'T RECALL WHEN. . .

William A. Hart, Jr.

October 26, 2023

I don't recall when I first became interested in George Masa. However, my curiosity was piqued when I came across infrequent mentions of his name while reading about the Great Smokies and when passing Masa Knob during my Appalachian Trail outings. What is certain was this: I wanted to know who he was.

In the mid-1990s, my friend, Bob Brunk, invited me to write an article for a publication he was planning: *May We All Remember Well — A Journal of the History & Cultures of Western North Carolina*. It was his invitation that provided the opportunity and inspiration to pursue my latent interest in Masa. Subsequently, I submitted an article titled "George Masa ~ The Best Mountaineer" to *May We All Remember Well*, Volume I, published in 1997. This was the first comprehensive article written about him. Afterward, George Masa became a close, greatly beloved, virtual family friend and a man well worth knowing. Likewise, Alice has shared the quest to know Masa and has been integrally involved in all our Masa endeavors. I delight that we have been partners throughout.

From this beginning, Alice and I have devoted a portion of our lives to George Masa to tell his story and share his legacy. We have for decades collected Masa materials, photographs, and ephemera which depict his images in a wide variety of publications, brochures, booklets, postcards, and in the Masa/McCoy *Guide to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park*. I have explored trails mentioned in his *Guide*, placing my footsteps in his. And Alice and I have sought to help others to know and appreciate Masa as we do. When thus engaged, we always say, "We're doing this for George."

Sharing the Masa story and legacy has taken diverse forms. I have made Masa presentations; Alice and I have opened our Masa collection to researchers; we have responded to Masa inquiries; and I made a presentation to the Great Smoky Mountains Association's publication committee in support of publishing a George Masa biography. Two of our most notable endeavors, however, were finalized in 2022. The first involved committee engagement advocating for a North Carolina Highway Historical Marker honoring George Masa, ultimately erected in Asheville, North Carolina (ID: P-99). Also, Alice and I finalized the donation of our Western North Carolina Regional Library to the University of North Carolina at Asheville, now housed in Special Collections as the Bill and Alice Hart Collection. It is a resource for those researching the WNC region as well as Masa and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which he helped establish.

Finally, in May 2023, Alice and I participated in Kephart Days in Bryson City, North Carolina and spoke at the unveiling of markers honoring Laura White Kephart and George Masa, symbolically representing closure to Kephart's life and that of his wife and colleague.

Immersion into George Masa's life has afforded two notable highlights. In 2009, I was honored by being invited by Horace Kephart's great granddaughter, Libby Kephart Hargrave, to view a group of Masa photos hidden away for decades. As I slowly examined these, I experienced emotions akin to viewing the Holy Grail. I will never forget these moving moments. The second experience followed the purchase of an 8 x 10 inch black and white photograph which featured enlarged photomurals of Masa's work. These were incorporated into the interior decor of a building that looked vaguely familiar. Based on a hunch, I visited and was admitted to this building (which is not open to the public) and there they were: E. L. Fisher enlargements of Masa images, seemingly as pristine as the day they were first installed decades earlier. I was amazed!

Alice and I could have never imagined that our quest to know George Masa would reward us with a host of cherished friends. Two of them enjoyed a direct connection to Masa. Barbara Ambler Thorne, a close friend of Masa's, shared her treasured remembrances of him, and Jeanne Creaseman Lance delighted me with recollections of Masa when he resided with her family. Other friends have contributed immeasurably to the public's appreciation of Masa. Paul Bonesteel produced the highly acclaimed film *The Mystery of George Masa*; George Ellison and Janet McCue authored *Back Of Beyond ~ A Horace Kephart Biography*, in which they included a chapter on Masa; Libby Kephart Hargrave tirelessly championed Kephart and Masa through numerous avenues; Angelyn Whitmeyer created a comprehensive George Masa Photo Database; and Janet McCue and Paul Bonesteel are authoring a George Masa biography. Also, we have developed new friendships through Masa endeavors. Beyond these and others too numerous to mention, we have been especially gratified by the interest in Masa shown by our family and longtime friends.

Alice and I never anticipated, with the publication of "George Masa ~ The Best Mountaineer," what an impact George Masa would ultimately have on our lives. In the intervening years, we have internalized our admiration for him and his contributions and recognized that his life was a model of unparalleled dedication. Inspired by Masa's story, we have endeavored to assure that his life and legacy are forever preserved and cherished.