

Ernie
Dickerman

1910-1998

A Tribute



Ernie
Dickerman



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Ernie Dickerman, Buffalo Gap, May 1986.

COVER PHOTO

A youthful Dickerman found the Great Smoky Mountains to be "what I was looking for on this planet." He shows his enthusiasm by turning handstands at 6,600 feet atop Mt. LeConte.

Photographer untraced but warmly thanked in absentia.

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During the first shock wave of Ernie's death, four members of the Virginia Wilderness Committee each wrote a quick paragraph about Ernie, and sent them out as a newsletter. It was the first VWC newsletter not reporting a specific piece of news about wilderness. Good news, bad news, the VWC only sends out a newsletter when there's something to say (one of Ernie's rules). But we felt the wilderness community expected, and needed, an immediate comment on the loss of Ernie; and in that newsletter we promised then to produce a "festschrift" later. Here it now is, with contributions long and short, funny and sad, light-hearted and serious, from colleagues, friends and family.

As well as teaching us to fight for wilderness, Ernie has somehow inspired us to be articulate. I have been fascinated and impressed at the prose of the contributions and loath to do more than the barest editing. So there will be some repetition of stories and events, but each time told in such a completely personal way that I wanted to include almost everything that came in. Thanks to the generous support of The Wilderness Society, I have been able to do so, and reprint most of the photographs. I have started with the formal resolutions, passed by The Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club, and continued with the contributions, as far as possible, in the chronological order in which the contributors knew Ernie.

Ernie would not have wanted us to do this. He would not have wanted us to waste any time and money. He would have urged us to get on with the important stuff-- I can hear him saying it. And we have nearly always done whatever Ernie suggested.

Well Ernie, I'm sorry but we had to do this. You brought your life and work to a closure that was as tidy as you could possibly make it, but for some of the community you left behind, there were some raw, ragged edges; and if this book does anything to soften these, it will not have been in vain.

My deepest thanks to everyone who contributed, and supported us, and in particular to Bob Dickerman, Ernie's oldest nephew, for his unfailing helpfulness, support and encouragement. My apologies to anyone who feels excluded, or misrepresented, or feels that the book is too little, or too much, or poorly compiled. I have done my best in as short a time as possible. And yes, Ernie, we will now get on with the important stuff; but we'll still be thinking of you.

Elizabeth Murray,
Editor, Vice-President, VWC

In everyone's life there will come along a few people who will leave an indelible mark. For a great many of us, Ernie Dickerman was such a one. Tireless crusader for the environment, accomplished political activist, close family friend, each of us knew Ernie in more than one of his roles. His death leaves us diminished.

Faced with the shock of immediate loss, some of us tried to put our response into words. You may have seen our brief notes in the Newsletter of the Virginia Wilderness Committee. It was already apparent at that time that something more was needed for us to come to terms with Ernie's passing, and to sum up the impact that he had on people, on institutions, and on the future of our country. Therefore we decided to ask a number of Ernie's friends and colleagues to try to capture the essence of their life and work with Ernie in a series of reminiscences. Here is the result.

We accepted that there would inevitably be repetition and duplication. After all we represent a set of overlapping circles with Ernie at the center. One can think of these pieces as views from many angles. If they are successful they should reveal Ernie in four dimensions, large as life and through time.

Finally let's keep in mind what this is all about. Although he led a rich and varied life Ernie was completely single-minded about the big issue. And we should be, too. The question that this memorial should leave in the mind of every one of you is the same question that Ernie asked at the beginning of each day: What can I do today to further the cause of wilderness preservation? If that message comes through loud and clear, we will have given Ernie his due measure of honor.

Jim Murray
President
Virginia Wilderness Committee



ERNIE DICKERMAN

Biographical information in his own words 20 April 1998

Born December 22, 1910. Grew up as a boy in Richmond VA and Roanoke VA. For 88 years a bachelor, free and independent. Graduated from Oberlin, Ohio in 1931 with an A.B., having majored in Economics (a subject I understood, unlike Chemistry and Physics in which I racked up 16 hours of grade D).

Moved to Knoxville, Tennessee in December 1933 when I had been hired, by mail, by the Tennessee Valley Authority (newly created by the Roosevelt administrations as of May 12, 1933) - leaving a job with White Motors Corp. at Cleveland, Ohio. For the next 35 years I lived at Knoxville, except for 1943-46 when I was elsewhere by invitation of the U.S. Army.

However, I remained with TVA for only 3 1/2 years, not wishing to become a permanent government employee. Joined a local plastics molding company with whom I remained for nearly 20 years.

As a member of the Conservation Committee of the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club at Knoxville, I became an active conservationist. The Committee was principally concerned with management problems of the Great Smoky Mountains National

Park (the first Rangers arrived at the recently established park in 1930) and ditto with the Cherokee National Forest. Harvey Broome, a native of Knoxville and one of the half-dozen founders of the Wilderness Society along with Bob Marshall, was the real leader of this Conservation Committee; we became close friends and worked together on a variety of conservation issues until his death about 1968 due to a heart attack. Through Harvey I became acquainted with most of the early leaders of the Wilderness Society; ultimately joined the staff of the Society in 1966; and for the next decade (1966-76) as a staff member had frequent contacts with the governing Council members (particularly including Sig Olsen and Olaus Murie).

Living at Knoxville, my principal recreation was prowling the Great Smoky Mountains on foot - a 500,000 acre mountain wilderness. When I found the Smoky Mountains (within a month after arriving in Tennessee), I knew I had found what I was looking for on this planet; and which explains why I stayed at Knoxville for so many years (only 50 miles from the Park). In fact I left only when moving to Washington DC to the Wilderness Society headquarters in 1966.



This photo of Ernie appeared in a clipping from a Knoxville newspaper in January 1947. The paper reported that Ernie had, in his wanderings in the Smokies, come across a plane which apparently had crashed in 1942 and never been found.

What got me on the staff of the Society was the stupid idea of the then Director of the National Park Service (George Hartzog) to build a new highway across the Great Smokies Park through the wilderness of the western half of the Park - which intent he announced at a meeting of all national park superintendents at Gatlinburg, Tennessee in September 1965.

Already at that date the Conservation Committee of the Hiking Club, under its Chairman Harvey Broome, had developed a Wilderness Plan for the Great Smokies Park (fast action considering that the Wilderness Act had only been passed in September 1964). What got me hired by the Wilderness Society in February 1966 was that the Society wanted someone thoroughly familiar with the Park as a natural area and strongly wilderness-minded to travel about the southeast promoting the citizens' wilderness plan and opposing the Director of the Park Service's road proposal. It turned out that people all over the United States from Florida to California, from Maine to Washington, were opposed to new roads being built in the national parks, including this proposal for the Great Smokies Park. Also we had influential friends in Washington. With us folks in Knoxville leading the fight and providing the ammunition (the facts for wilderness and against the road), a vigorous campaign was mounted and continuously waged.

It took a seven-years fight to defeat this stupid road proposal until in 1971 Director Hartzog threw in the towel. Meanwhile Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall had told him it was "no go" and the North Carolina Congressman most directly concerned had recognized that even if the Park Service persisted the opposition was so strong that Congress would not appropriate the money.

For a variety of political reasons and

despite that an overwhelming majority of citizens testified for wilderness at the official wilderness hearings held by the Park Service in June 1966 at Gatlinburg TN and Bryson City NC, not a single acre of the Great Smokies Park is yet in the Wilderness System. However, in the mid-1970's then Park Superintendent Boyd Evison drew up a Master Plan for the Park which essentially incorporates the citizens wilderness proposal and otherwise severely limits any development in the Park, which Master Plan to this day determines the management of the Park.

Moving to Washington DC in the fall of 1966, I continued to cover the eastern half of the United States doing considerable traveling to let folks know of the opportunity the Wilderness Act of 1964 offered to permanently preserve unchanged choice natural areas on the nation's national forest, parks and wildlife refuges. And in Washington to wrestle with the federal land managing agencies and lobbying the Congress in favor of numerous wilderness bills.

Retiring from the staff of the Wilderness Society at age 65 in January 1976, I moved to Virginia to the little old mountain farm in the Alleghenies on which I have lived for the past 22 years - near Buffalo Gap in Augusta County, a dozen miles due west of Staunton. No sooner had I settled in than at its annual meeting in June that year the Virginia

Wilderness Committee chose to elect me president. This organization since its founding in 1969 has initiated and co-ordinated the state-wide action promoting application of the Wilderness Act to suitable areas on Virginia's national forests, parks and refuges. After several years as president or vice-president, I have ceased to be an officer but [continued as] a highly active member of the Committee. Over the years the Committee has enjoyed a creditable measure of success.

Currently the Virginia Wilderness Committee is working with numerous local and regional groups seeking to persuade the Forest Service in developing its new management plan for the Jefferson National Forest (located mostly in southwest Virginia) to recommend 7 or 8 new areas for wilderness designation and by appropriate official status to preserve numerous roadless areas and old growth tree stands. Regrettably due to the persistent refusal of the incumbent Congressman (Robert Goodlatte) for the 6th Virginia Congressional District to even consider wilderness designation for any federal area, we are not actively pushing any wilderness proposals on the George Washington National Forest which mostly lies in the 6th District. However, we have full descriptions written and detailed maps drawn for half a dozen first class wilderness proposals to spring when the political climate improves with the election of a new Representative.



BILL MEADOWS

President of The Wilderness Society

Read at the Memorial Service for Ernest Dickerman on October 3, 1998.

I wish I could be with all of you today paying tribute to a wonderful man who gave his every waking moment to making the world a better--and more natural--place.

When I think about Ernie, the first thing that comes to mind are his eyes. There was an inquisitiveness that struck me right away. In his eyes, you could also see wisdom; he'd seen a lot and understood even more.

When talking with Ernie, you could look into his eyes and see commitment, focus, and the confidence that comes from success. Ernie's eyes conveyed caring--and not just for the person he was with. The Wilderness Society

salutes our long-time friend for a life full of dedication to, and enthusiasm for, wilderness. Yesterday our Governing Council passed the following resolution:

WHEREAS, no one did more than Ernie Dickerman to protect wilderness in the East; and

WHEREAS, Ernie Dickerman was a pivotal figure in the passage of the 1975 Eastern Wilderness Act and the 1984 Virginia Wilderness Act, which left a priceless wilderness legacy for future generations; and

WHEREAS, Ernie Dickerman gave new meaning to the word "tireless"; and

WHEREAS, Ernie Dickerman was a master of persuasion; and

WHEREAS, Ernie Dickerman enlisted hundreds of citizens in the fight for land protection and taught them how to succeed; and

WHEREAS, his ardent effort to save nature's great creations never robbed Ernie Dickerman of his sense of humor and his respect for others' opinions; and

WHEREAS, Ernie Dickerman gave many years to The Wilderness Society, as charter member, employee, and dedicated volunteer,

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Governing Council of The Wilderness Society salutes Ernie Dickerman for a life fully lived and endless natural gifts bestowed upon all Americans for generations to come.



THE SIERRA CLUB

At its meetings on September 26-27 1998, the Sierra Club Board of Directors adopted a resolution commemorating the life and accomplishments of Ernie Dickerman. The resolution reads:

The Sierra Club notes, with a great sense of loss, the recent death of Ernest M. Dickerman at age 87 -- one of the nation's leading proponents of wilderness preservation.

Ernie Dickerman was a charter member and a full-time organizer for The Wilderness Society and president of the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club. A drafter of the Wilderness Act and

the father of the Eastern Wilderness Act, he was a tireless campaigner for wilderness everywhere. He was of great help to the Sierra Club in its campaign to pass the Alaska National Lands Conservation Act of 1980 and in its efforts to see that the act was not riddled by anti-environmental amendments. He was active in the Sierra Club's Virginia Chapter and received a Club Certificate of Appreciation in 1975 and a Special Service award in 1993.

BUFFALO GAP
August 4, 1998

Dear Friends,

Some of you will know what this note conveys. Some will not.

Ernie's own "suggested announcement of my death" was as follows:

On (date) Ernest M. "Ernie" Dickerman, a lifelong bachelor, died at age 87 by his own hand as he had long planned, on the little old farm in the Alleghany Mountains where he had lived since retiring in 1976. "Quit while you are ahead" is sound philosophy, both in poker and in life. For over sixty years, as an amateur or as a professional, he was an active conservationist, especially in wilderness preservation.

Ernie had long anticipated this departing on his own terms as much a part of his guiding philosophy as was living his life frugally, fully, and honorably. All of us knew that this would eventually happen. And yet we were surprised when it did: on a halfmoon-lit night, at the end of a beautiful, beautiful Shenandoah Valley day, under a wild cherry not far behind the home that he had loved here in this quiet Appalachian gap between Big and Little North Mountains.

We were surprised. And yet many of us, when recalling our last moments with Ernie, can detect some special aspect, some special faking of fond leave. He was the (probably bemused) producer of this unfolding final act: Ernie alone knew how its end would give each preceding scene a new richness, a special poignancy.

Lovers of Ernie's letters through the years may be able to recognize, even through these unavoidable xeroxes, the famously idiosyncratic typeface of this, his 1945 (1946?) Royal Portable. Its use here wasn't Ernie's suggestion, but the following was:

You will find with this letter some 90 already addressed self-adhesive labels which I will very much appreciate being used to notify conservation organizations to which I belonged and personal friends. To make the job as simple as possible, may I suggest you have the announcement photocopied from a typed original onto heavy paper -- perhaps 6 announcements per sheet to be put into individual notices suitable for use as regular postcards. KINKO'S at Harrisonburg and probably other commercial photocopiers know how to do this. Reasonably early mailing of the announcements will be appreciated.

Letter typed on Ernie's typewriter by Bob Dickerman,
and sent out per Ernie's instruction.

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This letter to "Dear Family, Each and Everyone," and dated July 31st, was neatly placed atop a stack of everything that we would need the next morning, and through the days to follow: Where everything (else) was. Keys. What personal papers might be of interest to environmentalists, and the precise person/friend to make those judgments. And thoughts about his beloved cats, Tangerine and Buffalo Gap, whom he hoped, with someone's help, would be able "to continue their life in the country together -- the only kind of life they have ever known." "Their regular food," he wrote, "is Food Lion's Adult Cat Food, about \$7.00 for an 18 lb. bag."

Ernie's letter began:

"I'm the captain of my ship
And the master of my fate,
In the wilds of this wild country"

But the above is no longer true. Too many minor deficiencies have accumulated during the past couple of years, physically and mentally, slowly, progressively.

I would have made a better Indian (before the Europeans' arrival) than a whiteman.

The (unpre-Columbian Indian-like!) WALL STREET JOURNAL subscription, he also explained, had terminated July 20th...but publisher Dow Jones has continued to send (it) this week, strictly on its own."

Ernie is gone; he went as he wished. And even THE NEW YORK TIMES, as someone you know, noted the enormous influence which this gentle, unassuming, but absolutely resolute individualist had on his nation...and on our awareness.

We are family, colleagues, disciples, neighbors and friends. Ernie wished that his ashes be strewn on this Buffalo Gap farm. We will assemble to do so -- and to have a memorial hike and a potluck meal together -- on Saturday, October 10. Directions and (any) more detail may be sought from your correspondent, nephew Bob Dickerman, after Labor Day, via dickerman at (the typewriter has no whatzit!) erols.com, at (703) 527-4062, or at 3900 Vacation Lane, Arlington, Virginia 22207.

To re-cite the one phrase which Ernie himself repeated in his letter: "Quit while you're ahead" is sound policy and practice, both in poker and in life." While Ernie's physical frailties were becoming increasingly apparent, there was never any diminishment of his intellect, humor, articulateness, memory, or counsel -- nor of his love of a good environmental fight (with, of course, an eventual win/win outcome). He remained Ernie to the very end.

Ernest Dickerman, Defender of the Wilderness, Is Dead at 87

By HOLCOMB B. NOBLE

Ernest M. Dickerman, who was known by the Sierra Club as "the granddaddy of the Eastern wilderness" for his efforts to persuade people to defend their forests and wilderness from the power saws and bulldozers of loggers, developers, road builders and other commercial interests, commuted suicide late Friday or early Saturday at his cabin in the mountains of Buffalo Gap, Va. He was 87.

He was found under a cherry tree behind his cabin, having shot himself, the sheriff's office reported. In a note to his family, Mr. Dickerman said he took his own life as he had long planned to do after the infirmities of age left him unable to "master my own fate in the wilds of this wild country."

Mr. Dickerman was a well-known lobbyist for the Wilderness Society, president of the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club and a leader of campaigns that led to the designation of protected wildlife areas for more than 100 million acres in the United States, beginning in 1947. For several decades he was in the forefront of efforts to hold down development in the national parks, forests and designated wild lands. Among his accomplishments was the halting of proposed oil drilling that he said threatened the scenic highlands of Laurel National Forest in Virginia.

Brock Evans, former vice president for national issues of the Audubon Society, said, "The only way the environmental movement ever gets anything accomplished is through endless pressure, endlessly applied. And that was Ernie Dickerman — always writing letters or making calls."

Mr. Dickerman, by all accounts, was a tireless hiker who was said to have had a compass in his head. He never used trails or trail maps, often carried the backpacks of less hardy companions and plunged onward through the wild and up the sides of mountains to what he regarded as a greater glory. On one of his climbs to the summit of Mount LeConte in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee and North Carolina, he said, "This is what I was looking for on this planet," and in spread of planting a flag he did a handsstand at the top.

Ernest Miller Dickerman was born on Dec. 22, 1914, in Chicago. His father, Judson C. Dickerman, was a civil engineer with the Federal Power Commission in Washington. His mother died when he was 5, and he and his brother, Charles, were taken care of at home by their sister, Virginia, who was 11, and were then sent to boarding schools. Mr. Dickerman graduated from Gettysburg Academy in Gettysburg, Pa., and then from Oberlin College in 1931.

He loved the outdoors from an

early age and went to work for the Tennessee Valley Authority in Knoxville in 1933, a job in which he hiked or biked or canoed around the poor villages of Tennessee, telling people what it was going to be like for them when they got electricity and trying to figure out where to put the power lines. He left after four years and went to work in a button factory in Knoxville.

Soon after, he joined the Smoky

A tireless hiker who spoke out against development plans.

Mountains Hiking Club, which was formed to help preserve the natural woodlands and successfully pushed for three national parks, the Smokies, the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia and Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. He monitored the Government's management and development of the Smokies, fighting several battles on those issues with the National Park Service.

"Fortunately the service decided that there would be no commercial development, but it was unfortunate that the Civilian Conservation Corps

was allowed to put in a dozen camps," Mr. Dickerman said. "The C.C.C. was one of the best things any government ever did anywhere but they overdid it in the Smokies. They built endless numbers of fire roads up every big hollow, and too damn many automobile camps, and 650 miles of park trails. Guys like me considered them another form of devastation."

Mr. Dickerman served in England and France with an Army chemical warfare unit in World War II. After the war, he found that, "where the Forest Service had been adding wild lands to its system, lands were now being removed."

"World War II technology made rough-terrain vehicles a reality," he continued, "and wilderness areas once thought inaccessible could now be logged at a profit."

A crisis arose in the mid-1950's for Mr. Dickerman and other conservationists when the Federal Bureau of Reclamation announced a plan to build a dam in Echo Park in the Dinosaur National Monument on the Utah-Colorado border. With the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club leading the way, the conservationist groups, acting in concert for one of the first times, blocked the dam and persuaded Congress to pass the Wilderness Act in 1964 to provide permanent protection from development for wilderness areas.

Two years later, when George B. Hartzog Jr., then director of the Park Service, announced a plan to build a second highway through the Smokies, Mr. Dickerman quit his job at the button factory and joined the staff of the Wilderness Society as a full-time organizer. He traveled the country giving speeches and organizing hikes against the highway, and the resulting overwhelming public opposition killed the project.

After he retired from the Wilderness Society in 1976, Mr. Dickerman was given a number of awards from the Sierra Club and other groups for his work in conservation and environmental protection. But he did not slow down. He worked for years at promoting conservation from his cabin on the farm of a nephew, C. Robert Dickerman, his only survivor.

As he approached his 85's, the phone in his cabin often rang with calls from young conservationists seeking advice on how to overcome opposition.

"You have to keep right on pointing out how important it is to preserve the wild country," Mr. Dickerman told them. "There is always a lot of opposition to wilderness. People are always a bit more interested in the short-term economic benefits rather than the long-term quality-of-life issues."

BOB DICKERMAN

Uncle Ernie by Bob Dickerman, nephew

Something inside of each of us, I think, wants to be an Ernie: free of mortgages, spouses, 8-to-5 jobs, babysitters, college bills, parents-in-law, urban living, monthly payments, less-than-essential possessions, crabgrass, others, expectations...of all that encumbers and confines. To be beholden to no one...and thus able, truly, "to be oneself." And even, with luck, to be oneself while doing what one loves, and what one wants to do above all else..

It's a powerful temptation. But of the 50 or 60 of us who gathered at the Buffalo Gap farm on October 3rd to scatter Ernie's ashes, none had known this particular lure longer than I.

I am Ernie's oldest nephew, and the

individual whom he chose to find him under the wild cherry on August 1st. So ended (maybe!) nearly 60 years of being tantalized by Ernie's choices, tempted by his freedoms, and intrigued by his accomplishments.

All who eulogized Ernie on October 3rd spoke of the remarkable power that Ernie had to influence our lives, to mold our thinking, to change our directions, to focus our energies. Ed Clark used the word "hooked." Others repeated it. Each attributed an important facet of their adult lives to this remarkable character.

But for me, the temptation "to be like Ernie" began in childhood. Several years into the Depression, when I was a toddler, and more than 35 years



Supplied by Bob Dickerman



Ernie Dickerman, off to the wilderness, Uinta Mountains, Utah, June 1956.



Ernie at "camp".

before Ernie himself was to move to the neighborhood, he and my dad wrestled fallen chestnut through the woods along Dry Branch. In a pretty clearing below Crawford Mountain, about an hour's stroll from what folks would later know as "Ernie's farm", they built a simple, wonderful, single-room log cabin. Family photos show the two muscular brothers, Depression graduates of Oberlin College, laying out the field-stone corners, sawing, stripping and notching the timbers; then roofing and caulking what my parents feared might, given the times, become our family's only home.

The brothers had shared a difficult childhood, but would approach adult life quite differently. Sons of an MIT-educated civil engineer, their mother

had contracted tuberculosis soon after Ernie's birth in 1910. It is part of family lore - and speculation - that disease prevented her from ever holding or cuddling her children. Then, when Ernie was five - and my Dad seven - she died. Years of shuttling from place to place followed. The boys spent their youths in boarding schools, eventually completing Gettysburg Academy before heading off to Oberlin.

Dad played by the rules. Became a physician. Married not just once, but twice. Fathered five children. Worked hard. Built a practice. Volunteered with the Lions, the Ruritan, the osteopathic association, and the Democratic party. Took consecutive weeks off only once in his life. Worked for all of us,

did us proud, "served his community," and fell to heart attacks at age 69 while still working full-time, with a son still in college.

The contrast between the two brothers was part of our family's lore. Ernie had decided early that *living as he wished* was more important than fulfilling others' expectations. He biked, canoed, hiked, improvised and wandered...and when he discovered the Great Smokies, his course was set. Being in the outdoors, the wilder the better, and with or without kindred spirits: *this* would be his life, and all else would be secondary.

He lived in YMCA rooms all through his Knoxville years, until moving to a Washington "efficiency" in the 1960's. His work was at a button factory, chosen largely for its shoddy management: few noticed or cared if Ernie's Smoky Mountain Hiking Club activities prevented him from showing up on a Friday, a Monday, a Tuesday, a Thursday, or even all week long.

Ernie's prowess as an outdoorsman; his down-on-the-belly hikes, plunging through the briars, face-to-face with snakes and bears, and tunneling through the laurel...impossibly ahead of everyone even while carrying their packs as well as his, were the stuff of legend. When the Selective Service in 1942 declared him 4-F - because one leg turned out to be longer than the other! - the absurdity made the local

paper's front page: "Renowned Hiker 4-F, Army Says."

To hear Ernie tell it, even World War II was fun. Refusing officer training, he "rose" to corporal (The Army Chemical Corps having waived the equal-leg requirement). He spent months in the English countryside, crossed the Channel some days after D-Day, then tented for additional months in a Parisian park. He made lifelong friends both places, sailed home, and returned to his Smokies.

Dad - raising a second family while paying child support for his first, ushering in church, teaching Sunday school, singing at charity benefits and trying to farm as well as be an always-on-call country doctor - would sometimes deem Ernie's style "selfish." But watching the two of them, as a teenager and then as a college student, I thought Ernie's choices - in theory, at least - almost irresistible. Who needed the Great Philosophers? I had, in my own family, every relevant role model. Sometime in the 1950's, Ernie bought a car; his first. Until he was in his 40's, according to family lore, Ernie had been adamant about only renting, and then only for trips into the mountains. As my Dad explained it:

"Before, Ernie was always afraid that, if he had a car, he might be leaving the factory some evening...and it would be raining...and some woman

from the office would be standing there at the exit, hating to step out into the rain...and Ernie, having a car, would have little choice but to take pity on her and offer her a ride home and...who knows?...wind up married! So buying a car at age 40-odd was a big thing. By then he felt safe; his future as a bachelor secure."

Within years, he was also living in the nation's capital: hardly the location of choice for a lover of the wild and free. As he had declared to me one time: "One of our problems is that we don't have representative government in this country."

"How can you say that, Uncle Ernie?" I'd said. "Of course we have representative government: that's what this country's all about." "Nope. And here's why: first, there are so many beautiful, beautiful places in this country that only a few really unrepresentative oddballs would ever think of leaving them to move to this city. And then, realize that these are types - unlike most of us - that thrive on working 18 hour days, seven days a week, and getting mostly criticized for it...while constantly having to beg money from people with their own agendas. No, Bob, 'representative' is exactly what these guys *aren't*."

I had, by then, and against every inclination, fallen much more into my father's style than Uncle Ernie's. But his wonderfully uncompromising individuality still tantalized: Although

Ernie had chosen to be without so much, he seemed to experience a level of personal happiness that was rare...while truly "making a difference." *And* helping others.

On one of the rare occasions at the farm when I managed to get Ernie to speak about his past, I was surprised to learn that his first job, after Oberlin, had been in a "settlement house" in Cleveland. "Well, you know that I didn't succeed very well in social work," said Ernie. "I'm just not that social."

But of course he was - or *could be* - if he also had his needed quotient of solitude. All who spoke of Ernie on October 3d cited his influence on others, his effectiveness as an activist, his charm as a conversationalist, his flirtations with every attractive female in sight (once he was, as an octogenarian, "safe"!), his gentleness as a mentor, his warmth as a neighbor. But Ernie was also a very, very private man: a reader, a philosopher, a wanderer, a naturalist, a thinker, a tinkerer, and a (gifted!) writer. Ernie had had the farm (which is actually my family's) to himself for years when we'd been abroad; when I retired I began to visit two or three times each month. We'd have dinner together but breakfast and lunch alone: socializing, Ernie knew, is best when balanced with silence.

One beautiful November morning in 1979, Ernie suggested hiking from the house to Elliot Knob, atop Big

Photo by Bob Dickman



Ernie harvesting apples to take to the cider press, Buffalo Gap 1977.

North Mountain, at 4,458 feet Virginia's highest point north of the James. We left after breakfast, crossed a single man-made obstacle (our own pasture fence), crawled through the mandatory laurel thickets, picnicked on the summit, and headed back. The last two hours were in total darkness, stumbling over rockpiles, fallen trees and unseen obstacles of every sort. At 44, I was bushed; Ernie barged ahead, cursing loudly when his crashes were especially spectacular. And that, I realize now, was when he was almost 70. Another decade would pass before I was finally able to keep up with him on walks through the local woods. And only in the past year did we begin to worry about him wandering alone.

Ernie's intellectual explorations, though, never slowed. His range of reading was extraordinary: all sorts of history, biographies of virtually all of the Founding Fathers; books by or about almost all of our Presidents; a spectrum of wilderness, conservation

and ecology books (many written by friends); *The Wall Street Journal*, *Technology Review*, *Sierra*, *The Amicus Journal*, *National Parks*, *Virginia Wildlife*, successive land use proposals for Augusta County and the Shenandoah Valley and, of course, the heavy tomes - and the hardly decipherable public notices - which indicated what the Forest Service *really* intended in the George Washington, Jefferson and other national forests.

There was rarely a day when there wasn't at least one phone call to Ernie about one or another wilderness project, challenge, or campaign. The calls came from the Hill, from Alaska, from the Northwest, from Harrisonburg, from Roanoke...from wherever in the country Ernie's insights and uniquely long-term perspective could make a difference. Students from James Madison University came to record "oral history"; a regular stream of attractive women (as well as men) came for meals, interviews, insights and inspira-



Ernie and his brother at "camp",
December 1956.

tion...and, in the case of the ladies, for compliments aplenty.

On a visit to Buffalo Gap some years ago Michael Frome, a contemporary of Ernie's and another of the earliest members of The Wilderness Society, said to me, while Ernie fetched another glass of cheap Port in the kitchen: "You folks in the family probably can't appreciate it, Bob; but there's not a single night in America that, around some campfire one place or another, they're not telling stories about Ernie Dickerman." A legend, truly, "in his own time." And now he's gone.

It's probably inevitable in the case of suicide: people ask whether Ernie was "depressed," ill, down, or whatever. The answer is No; his increasing physical frailties notwithstanding (trembling hands, poor hearing, ever-more-frequent naps), he had a terrific finale: starring at the Wilderness "mentoring" conference in Arizona in May; hosting family in early July; driving to Arlington on the 22d to celebrate my wife's birthday (and to deliver a terrific speech in her honor), working on still more wilderness projects, and enticing at least two more lovely ladies to picnics in the orchard.

His last Sunday afternoon was spent with the neighbors, the Pedersons, picking wild blueberries in the woods above the orchard. Photos show them all in great spirits; the weather was beautiful, as it would be for the rest of the week.

We know now that those last few days were also spent in making his final pre-departure preparations: giving his final gifts; canceling his WSJ subscription; assembling, in neatly-organized boxes, all that we would need in the coming days; composing his final letter to "Dear Family, Each and Every One"; lubricating, aligning, and buying new tires for his '92 Geo Prism, which would be left to the family; cleaning the house, doing the laundry, and saying his farewells (although none knew, of course, that these would be our last moments with him).

I arrived from Arlington rather later than expected on the 31st - and will always wonder what we might have discussed over supper that evening, had I not been delayed. Instead, I found him at his desk, finishing his usual bachelor meal of beans and whatever, and reading something. We greeted one another (he standing up to do so, which surprised me a bit), and I then fixed my own separate supper.

Ernie came, washed his things, and sat down with me. We chatted a bit about what we always chatted about: The weather. Farm projects. The family. The stock market. "The farm check book."

It was about 9:30 when Ernie announced, as he'd done scores of times before, that his day was about finished. I was ready to quit, too, and assembled whatever it was that I was going to take with me to the trailer in the orchard, where I generally have preferred to sleep. Ernie went to the living room, and returned with his friend Charles Little's *The Dying of the Trees: the Pandemic in America's Forests*. He had thought it an important book, and suggested that I peruse it as well - recommending that I read the final, summarizing chapter first. And he asked me whether he'd

remembered to show us a copy of Chris Bolgiano's portrait of him in the just-published summer issue of *Wild Earth*.

He had. But I took the *Trees* book, and left.

Sometime later that evening, Ernie must have typed his final note, which he carefully laid atop the various things that we'd need: "You will find my body under the wild cherry tree in the old garden. Ernie 7/31/98"

Days later, I wondered what it was about the Bolgiano article - of the several that had been written about him in the preceding several months - that caused Ernie, in what was presumably his very last comment to anyone here on Earth, to draw attention to it. Perhaps it was these concluding lines:

"In the simple, direct, yet profoundly eloquent way that characterized him, Ernie reduced all the palaver about wilderness to a few basic concepts. 'If you can't get beyond yourself, you're pretty narrow,' he said. 'There is obviously a greater force beyond our comprehension, and we respect it by preserving the creation in which this force is manifested.'"

CHRIS BOLGIANO

Ernie Dickerman, Grandfather of Eastern Wilderness

Adapted from the book, The Appalachian Forest, A Search for Roots & Renewal. Stackpole Books, 1998.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 was aimed at western national forests, and included only three areas in the East: Great Gulf in New Hampshire, and Shining Rock and Linville Gorge in North Carolina. The Forest Service resisted any additional wilderness areas in the East, claiming that no place could meet the criteria. Numerous easterners disagreed, especially a thin bachelor near retirement age, then living in Knoxville, Tennessee, named Ernest Dickerman. From the day that he had discovered the Great Smoky Mountains, Ernie committed his life to the preservation of the wild. "I knew," he said, "as soon as I entered the Smokies that I had found what I was looking for."

He was standing in his yard when I turned in the driveway of his retirement home in Buffalo Gap, Virginia. Wearing shorts and a plaid shirt, he had dressed up for our interview in a bolo tie made from an unusual shell he found on a Florida beach. The skin of his arms was mottled with age, but his face was clear, almost translucent. Ernie had been born in Illinois in 1910, but spent his childhood years

first in the Adirondacks, then in Roanoke, Virginia, within sight of mountains. His parents enjoyed the outdoors but they weren't seriously interested in it. Ernie's love of nature came from within himself, "simply a matter of my own temperament, of liking best of all to be prowling around outdoors," as he put it.

After graduating from Oberlin College in Ohio, he was among the early employees hired by the newly formed Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). It brought him to Knoxville in 1933, where he met his mountain mentor, Harvey Broome. Broome was eight years older and had been born in Knoxville when it was still a provincial valley town, with rutted lanes for streets. The pale blue band of mountains forty miles distant filtered slowly into Broome's early consciousness. His parents took him there, by train, on occasional picnics. A two week camping trip into the Smokies in 1917, when Broome was fifteen, fixed the mountains forever in his heart and his life. With teenage labor at a premium during World War I, Broome worked at an apple orchard near Mt. LeConte, and seized the opportunity to backpack to its summit. It was the beginning of innumerable treks. Broome wrote in later life that he found "something beautiful, different,

and intensely desirable" in the wild Smokies. Even while he earned a degree from Harvard Law School, he returned to Knoxville in the summers to get into the mountains. He grew skilled in woodcraft, hiking through deep snow and through rains so soaking that pockets of moisture in his firewood exploded, dousing the flames. He hiked "far past the last rough homestead where visitors were so rare that it was the prudent custom to pause outside the fence and call before approaching for fear of being shot."

It wasn't long before Broome saw places he loved being destroyed by careless logging and fires. He became an ardent conservationist. He was the driving spirit behind the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club, organized in 1924 to help promote the formation of a national park. A few years later, he led the mapping project for the Appalachian Trail through mazes of remote Smokies ridges. It was through the hiking club that Ernie met Harvey Broome, within a month of moving to Knoxville.

"It was customary in those days to work Saturday mornings," Ernie said. "We'd leave in the afternoon and head out over fifty miles of mostly dirt, winding roads that got worse as you got closer to the Smokies." On one of those outings, though without Ernie, somewhere between Newfound Gap and Clingman's Dome, Harvey Broome, Bob Marshall and several others founded The Wilderness

Society. A private, non-profit organization, its goal was and remains the saving of whatever wild places are left on public lands in America, for the sake of letting each wild place operate on its own unique ecological terms. Ernie joined as a charter member. He left TVA to work for a plastics molding firm, but remained in Knoxville. He couldn't get enough of the Smokies. With his friends in The Wilderness Society, he pioneered a new vision of Appalachian forests. Their efforts culminated in the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Two years later, Ernie retired from thirty years in the plastics factory and took a job with The Wilderness Society. His position description could be summed up in one phrase: to apply the Wilderness Act to the East. For four years he covered the southeast out of Knoxville, traveling widely to awaken citizens to the opportunities that the act offered. He mobilized people to act within the political system, and taught them how to legally protect the places they loved. First he would tramp around with people who knew the area, assessing individual wilderness possibilities. Under his direction, they composed and mailed out brochures and talked to community groups. With his advice, they visited their legislators to feel out which one might be willing to sponsor a bill. Ernie spoke at meetings of every kind, spontaneously, volubly, and with a quiet passion that moved many people. He gained a reputation for being able

to deal with many different persuasions, even his adversaries, without alienating them.

In 1969 he moved to the Washington, D.C. headquarters of The Wilderness Society to concentrate on lobbying for eastern wildernesses. He convinced congressmen and senators and, possibly more important, their staffs, about the benefits of wilderness: the possibilities for critical scientific knowledge gained by study of natural processes; the maintenance of wildlife habitat for popular game as well as non-game animals; the protection of watersheds for pure supplies of drinking water; the chance for the most challenging kind of outdoor recreation. He also pointed out that eastern wilderness areas would compose such a small percentage of the national forests that they could hardly threaten any extractive industries.

His major opponent in Washington was the Forest Service, but as Ernie constantly reminded the congressional staffers, citizens vote, and the Forest Service doesn't. His work grew increasingly intense in 1973 and '74. In 1975, President Gerald Ford signed the Eastern Wilderness Act. It acknowledged that eastern forests could recover from previous human abuse to regain a natural appearance. Included in the act were sixteen wildernesses totaling nearly 207,000 acres, and seventeen more to be evaluated for inclusion.

In 1976, Ernie retired from The Wilderness Society to his nephew's summer home in Buffalo Gap, Virginia, cradled between Big North and Little North Mountains. The next year, the Forest Service began a roadless area review and evaluation for wilderness designation. Almost immediately, Ernie was asked to lead a small group working for wilderness in Virginia. I met Ernie when I joined that group some years later. He was both the inspiration and the steadying hand behind a campaign that resulted in the 1984 designation of eleven wilderness and four wilderness study areas in the Virginia mountains. The study areas became wilderness in 1988. Ernie also helped wilderness advocates in other states plot their strategies, particularly in the concentration of national forest lands in the central and southern Appalachians. By the late 1990s, when a conservative political climate brought wilderness campaigns nearly to a standstill, there were forty-five wilderness areas from the George Washington National Forest in Virginia to the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia.

Together, they comprise a little more than half a million acres, less than ten percent of the federal lands, which are themselves less than twenty percent of Appalachia. Some four hundred thousand acres proposed for wilderness (by Ernie, naturally) in Great Smoky Mountains National Park would nearly double the total, but Congressional

Photo found in Ernie's desk



March 27, 1991. Ernie Dickerman by the creek on the farm, below the house and near the main pond. Subtitled by Ernie himself "Believe It or Not!"

approval has been stymied for decades by right-wing Senator Jesse Helms, who is slightly younger than Ernie. Ernie is hoping to bury him. A new generation, having learned from Ernie, bides its time for a swing in the political pendulum that will be favorable to wilderness designation.

Many mountain people reacted strongly against local efforts to designate wilderness areas. They saw that wilderness meant a ban on logging, although Appalachian wilderness areas typically comprise tracts of only six to eight thousand acres at high elevations, and don't have very good timber. They saw that wilderness designation brought in recreationists from outside.

Mountaineers who owned inholdings in proposed wildernesses feared restrictions on use of their own land. There was a false but unshakable belief that hunting and fishing would be prohibit-

ed. Or that once a wilderness was established, the next step would be to outlaw hunting. Most of all, the exclusion of motorized vehicles enraged mountaineers. "You put in it wilderness," threatened a homemade plywood sign in the late 1970s in the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia, "and we'll put it in ashes."

Ernie recognized that mountaineers had none of the motives that drove urban dwellers to support wilderness. Patiently, clearly, he explained what wilderness designation really meant. He never got rattled, even at meetings so heated his friends worried they would all get beaten up. Over the years Ernie never seemed to lose his energy, either, hiking up mountains and sending out letters to galvanize action. He still mowed his own lawn.

He showed me around his yard, pointing to trees he had transplanted over

the years. His house was as spare as he was: the living room was furnished with a couch, a woodstove, a desk, and a few chairs, with drapes strung across the end of the room to wall off a downstairs bedroom. He hated television and got his news by phone from his many contacts, as well as from the Wall Street Journal. He subscribed in order to see what the opposition was up to. He had never married because he always knew what he wanted to do and feared it would cause too much conflict with a spouse's desires. On his refrigerator was a sign: Age and treachery will overcome youth and skill.

As we sat on his front porch talking, a thunderstorm blew up. The day turned darker, as if night was approaching, though it was still afternoon. I said, "Ernie, I'm sure you're like me, you watch the forest and see the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, and it helps you consider your own death."

"Sure, absolutely," he said.

"So do you have anything in mind for your tombstone?"

Ernie chuckled, something he did often. He had decided years ago to be cremated, he said, and at first wanted his ashes scattered in the Smokies, as he had scattered those of his friend Harvey Broome years ago.

"But I've lived here near Buffalo Gap for so long now, more than twenty years," he said, "that I've changed my

mind." Ernie had rarely elaborated on the spiritual benefits of wilderness, in the way he spoke at length of its other advantages. He saw no merit in organized religions. Nonetheless, it was the spiritual power he felt in nature that gave meaning to his life. The wind strengthened, flipping up the undersides of leaves, which gave off a strange bright glow in the stormy gloom. Rain began to spatter on the roof, and from the earth rose the tangy smell of dust slaked. In the simple, direct, yet profoundly eloquent way that characterized him, Ernie reduced all the palaver about wilderness to a few basic concepts. "If you can't get beyond yourself, you're pretty narrow," he said. "There is obviously a greater force beyond our comprehension, and we respect it by preserving the creation in which this force is manifested."

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Note from Chris Bolgiano submitted to editor after Ernie's death:

I met Ernie in June of 1984, at the annual meeting of the Virginia Wilderness Committee at Jim and Bess Murray's lovely farm near Charlottesville. Ed Clark, whom I had met not long before, had invited me there and asked me to become editor of the group's newsletter. Ernie had been typing and sending out four to seven issues a year mostly by himself for the previous four or five years. He was glad to have help. We talked on the phone often in the first year, setting up procedures for soliciting news, photocopying, keeping the mailing labels up to date, etc. In the summer of '85, I worked up a logo on my brand new computer and put out my first edition. A half a dozen issues or so later, I heard through Ed that Ernie thought the newsletter was too objective, too dispassionate.



"We're an advocacy organization," he told Ed. "We're supposed to *inspire* people." I was quite taken aback. I had begun freelancing only a few years before, and at first I conceived of myself as a sort of science reporter, doubly bound by science and journalism to hallowed standards of objectivity. It took me ten more years to start realizing what Ernie knew profoundly well--that objectivity is so often an illusion, and passion is what moves people.