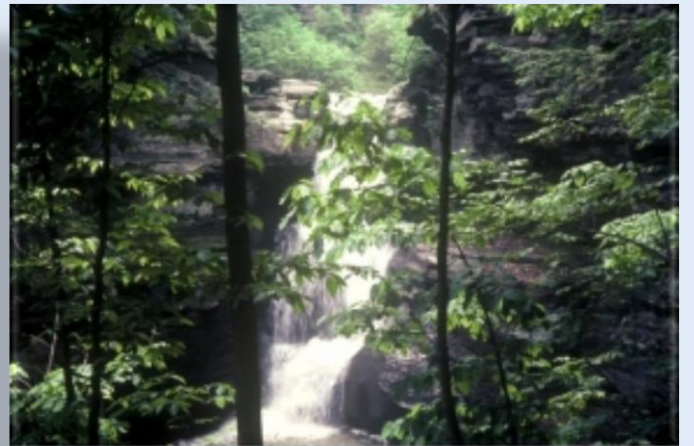


A Hidden Treasure

by Frederick Wickert



The thunderous roar penetrated my senses from somewhere off to my right. I longed to see this unknown wonder that stirred me with anticipation as I walked.

Tall green weeds, mixed with wild fern and ground ivy, brushed my legs and gently tugged at my pants while following the faint deer path. The softened ground, damp with heavy dew revealed small traces of deer hooves, almost like a wallpaper design on the woodland floor. I felt smothered with the fetid smelling closeness of pine, hemlock, and white birch. In the low light, rotted vegetation seemed content to rest in peace after a long reign of wooded royalty.

I nearly stumbled into a small cave entrance only to find it making a turn a few feet within. Suddenly and mammoth, there it was, a great rock wall sloping gradually downward. Finding a foothold, I eased onto the ledge of the yawning canyon below.

On one end a high, narrow waterfall spurted straight out from above, tumbling and twisting as it fell, spewing frothy white streaks out sideways, like the white handlebar mustache of an old man.

At the bottom white foam boiled, sending a spray cloud high into the air of the canyon. At once, the sound of booming far off thunder yet mixed with a loud splashing, hissing and gurgling like a cow peeing on a flat rock. Deep down in my bones could be felt the vibrations of the canyon walls.

Carved by the dashing, tumbling water over millions of years, arose a great wall of solid rock, upon which I stood. The top of the canyon was wide, narrowing part way down and widening again like an hourglass.

Clinging to the air a strange odor permeated, reminding one of damp and moldy dirt. The sun, seen only at midday in the canyon, revealed multiple rows of lines and ridges, providing good hand and toe holds. Green and brown moss adorned the walls near the top and lower down some of the wall was covered with poison ivy, the leaves a mixture of dull brown, red, orange and glossy green.

The water poured into a small pool fifty feet across, three to four feet deep and sloping up to eight or ten inches deep near the edge, overflowing on to a flat rock floor. Through the clear water could be seen a pool bottom of gray brown, small round pebbles mixed with moss and clay.

At the end of the flat floor of the canyon, the water shot off into unseen space through a crack in the wall two or three feet wide. I climbed the walls to and from the cave with wonder and delight, the sun occasionally peeking in from above. The bright light highlighting huge spider webs spread over the moss, droplets of water on them sparkling like diamonds in the sun light.

All of my life I remembered that scene, thrilling with the joy of discovering that special place. The quiet peaceful feeling that always descended over me whenever I went to that place, like the white blanket that covers the earth during a soft, wet snowfall.

It was a place I treasured and kept secret to all, except a special friend or a special girl friend I wanted to share it with. It was so well hidden from the outside world and only a few knew it existed.

I went away to college briefly, and then into the Air Force for twenty years. I returned home saddened to learn civilization had found my hidden treasure. The state had purchased all of the surrounding land and turned it in to a park. The route I had used was closed off and the cave entrance sealed. On the side of the canyon opposite the cave, a wide winding path was bulldozed through the woods to the bottom of the falls. An overlook of steel and concrete was constructed where visitors could come down several flights of stairs to a platform, from which they could view the falls.

The beauty and solitude that filled me with such great wonder and joy will never again be enjoyed by anyone. It is called "progress."