

Greene County

MAGAZINE

The Lewis Mountain School



GREENE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME 6 1989

(pages 60 - 65)

THE LEWIS MOUNTAIN SCHOOL⁴

John W. Stoneberger⁵

On January 3rd, 1912, my grandfather, John Scott Roach, went to the School Board of Stanardsville, Virginia and asked if they would put a public school on Lewis Mountain.

In the area before the creation of Shenandoah National Park, a distance of 105 miles from Waynesboro to Front Royal, there was a peak population of 5,000 mountain people around the year 1900.

Schools were located at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, in both Rockingham County on the west side and Greene County on the east side, but none on top of the mountain.

The summers were heavenly in the mountains. May 80 degrees F. at nights with warm, pleasant, sunny days and soft, cool breezes, but the winters were extremely disagreeable. Lots of cold, damp days, lots of snow, and temperatures below zero degrees F., and occasionally sometimes blizzards.

This caused an extreme hardship on children who had to travel four to seven miles one way to school. Some sleds, pulled by a single horse,

⁴ Printed by permission, The Mountain Laurel, September 1987

⁵ Copyright, 1987

could be used if equipped with shafts and breaching harness. If the snow was too deep, even this couldn't be used.

The School Board told Grandpa that they were sincerely interested in the education of the mountain children. They were grateful to him for being the community leader, but only so much money had been allocated and earmarked for the schools in use, and they saw no way they could help him with a pioneer school at this time.

Grandpa told them he had a large mountain home they could use as a school, free of charge; that he would remodel to specifications and would furnish the fuel for heat.

The Board said, "You are more than generous, Mr. Roach, you touch our hearts in the most tender way with the children's needs and your offer to help, but even if you would give us a school building, we know of no teacher who would be willing to go to Lewis Mountain under the extreme hardship and teach there."

Grandpa said, "Education in our family is a very important thing. I have a daughter who has recently graduated from the seventh grade with honors. Could she be the teacher?"

After a few moments of silence and talking with Icie, they said, "Mr. Roach, you humble our hearts with your love and concern for the

THE LEWIS MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

mountain children, plus your great generosity and Icie's willingness to teach. We see no way we could refuse your request."

So a legal contract was made. Icie Marie Roach would be the first teacher ever to teach at the Lewis Mountain School.

A copy of this document is sent along with this writing to the editor to prove the statement.

She would be paid \$15.00 per month and \$1.50 would be taken out of each paycheck for State Teacher's Retirement Fund.

As I write about a Great Heritage, a place for Aunt Icie Marie, who had character like her parents and who could endure hardship that others might be blessed, remains large in my heart.

She taught the community children and her own brothers and sisters, my mother being one of her pupils.

I can imagine seeing Grandpa coming home in the evening from Elkton with the mule team and bark wagon saying, "Icie Marie! I brought you a newspaper today. There is a current event you will want to teach tomorrow at school."

The great Titanic, the greatest passenger ship ever afloat, hit an iceberg 95 miles south of Grand Banks off Newfoundland and sank the 14th or 15 of April, 1912; many were drowned. A terrible tragedy!

THE LEWIS MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

To all my special readers with good mountain blood in their veins and living spirits, Mama said, "Life is a testing ground, (you will hit the D's in life) discouraged, disgusted, disappointed, and desponded, but never despair. The number one thing to do is propose good in your heart, have courage and faith that love can make a way where there is no way."

And so it was on January 4, 1912, the Lewis Mountain School came to birth through a hard, difficult process in the coldest part of winter, at the highest elevation of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Here the doors of knowledge were opened to the intelligent minds of the beautiful, healthy mountain children.

This building was also used as Pocosin Episcopal Number Two Mission, where Sunday School was taught, and Christmas programs enjoyed. I suppose many a child did say, "From Monday until Friday we would work and play, then back to school to Sunday School was where I learned to pray."

To many it was their only school of learning, and where the first gates of Heaven were opened, to a hope and promise of a passport to eternal life, in a church without a steeple.

THE LEWIS MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

One point I would like to make clear. In no way do I wish to imply there was anything short in the School System or Board of Greene County in letting a 14-year old young lady teach school for three or more months as a substitute teacher until a qualified teacher, probably from the Episcopal Church Headquarters, replaced her.

Mr. E. M. Gibson was Chairman of the School Board, Mr. W. G. Booton was the Clerk. These men had great wisdom, along with love and goodness. They measured high in integrity. As a hillbilly, I would say they were clean cut in character, and as neat, straight and upright as a Harnesburger mule's mane

After fulfilling her contract as a teacher, Icie Marie went to Hagerstown, Maryland to begin her studies and training as a registered nurse.

Later she married a fine gentleman named Christopher Panopolis from Greece, who was owner and operator of a restaurant in York, Pennsylvania, where he worked and she worked as a nurse at the hospital. Here they lived out their days.

Imagine our delight in going to the mail box in Shenandoah Valley during the Great Depression, when many family incomes were less than \$100 per year, to find a big box of goodies from Aunt Icie Marie. This is

what I call Blue Ridge Mountain Heritage Love. In her good fortune she would remember us in our misfortune.

I feel it would be appropriate to mention this, called the Great Mystery. Somewhere during the years of the Lewis Mountain School the name Roche got changed to Roach. As we go backwards it is always Roche, as we go forward it is always Roach. The Great Mystery still remains! We know Icie Marie, on the school document, signed her name Roche, and the seven grave stones say the same in Grandpa's family cemetery.

If you find interest in this article and ever travel the Skyline Drive, a few miles south of Big Meadow, you will pass the Bear Fence, a large crop of rocks, 50 or more feet high above the tree tops, and a half a mile or so long on the crest of the mountain. You will be near the area of the Old Lewis Mountain School and the Roach Episcopal Mission.