

Deep Creek (Lake) in the time of Meshach Browning

“My mind cannot imagine a more beautiful sight than could be obtained from the highest grounds of the Hoop-Pole Ridge, which commanded a view of the valley between that and the great Back-Bone . . . It was a grand sight to watch the tall grass, rolling in beautiful waves with every breeze which passed over its smooth surface, as well as the herds of deer skipping and playing with each other. It was not a strange thing to see a great lubberly-looking bear forcing his way through the grass, when every deer which got a sight or scent of him would bound off, with tail erect, toward the nearest thicket”

These are the words of Meshach Browning (1781-1859) from his book, *Forty-Four Years of the Life of a Hunter* (1859), describing much of the area that would become Deep Creek Lake. Browning was one the earliest settlers of Western Maryland and a prolific hunter, killing over 2,000 deer, 500 bear, and numerous panthers, wolves and rattlesnakes. His book, penned with a turkey quill by candlelight, recounts many of his hunting expeditions, as well as providing details about pioneer life in this area during the early 1800's.

Browning was born in Damascus, Maryland but spent most of his life in what would become Garrett County. His book covers his pioneering life from 1790 to 1835 and provides invaluable information on the natural, social and economic history of Western Maryland. The map accompanying this article was published in 1838 and is annotated with the approximate locations some of the sites mentioned in Browning's book.

Today, if you stood on Hoop-Pole Ridge (1) and looked north or east, most of your view would be encompassed by Deep Creek Lake, not the grassy fields described by Browning above. Indeed, it seems that most of the southern half of Garrett County was largely unoccupied during his time. He describes the “head of the North Branch of the Potomac ...was the greatest wilderness we were acquainted with” (2). Interestingly, the only town noted on the map – Selbysport (3) – is the only settlement discussed in Browning's book as well. Since the B&O Railroad segment to Oakland was not completed until 1851, and the only other access to the area was via the National Road in the northeastern part of the county, it is unsurprising that the southern end of the county had no population of note. Browning had several homesteads during the period documented in the book, generally located in The Glades (4) and Sang Run (5). His Sang Run cabin stood until at least 1919 when it was photographed by Leo Beachy¹, but has since been torn down. Browning's hunting grounds also ranged countywide – from the Youghiougeny River (6) where he wrestled for his life with a wounded buck, to Meadow Mountain (7) where it is easy to imagine the bear dens he describes along the trails of today's State Park. And of course, he mentions Deep Creek with “...water being so clear and cold, that it will make a man's arm pain him to the elbow, if he holds his hand in it a few minutes...” and “where success was certain” when fishing for fresh trout, a favorite of his first wife, Mary.

Although life was hard in the pioneer days of western Maryland, it is clear that Browning appreciated the natural beauty of the area, respected the wildlife he hunted and enjoyed the simple pleasures of life.

¹ Leo Beachy's photography of the area during the early 1900's could (and probably will be) the subject of a future article. A brief intro to his story and a link to the photo of Browning's cabin as well as many others can be found here: <http://www.garrettcountymuseums.com/photos.html>

“Here I found my true pleasure – my wife, dressed clean, her beauty, in my estimation, unsurpassed; the children, as clean as water and soap could make them, plenty to live on, and not an enemy on earth. I say, who could be happier than I was at the time?”

The Deep Creek Lake Lions has dedicated its new trail system at the McHenry Community Park to Meshach Browning. The multi-use, low intensity trail system, opening in 2019, will have informational signs throughout with passages and images from the life and times of Browning. Drafts of the signs can be found here: <http://www.deepcreekliions.org/MB-Trailhead.html>



Map information: Maryland. (inset) Western section of Maryland. An Illustrated Atlas, Geographical, Statistical, And Historical, Of The United States And The Adjacent Countries. By T.G. Bradford. Boston: Weeks, Jordan, And Company, 1838.

<https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~2333~220023:Maryland-?&qvq=w4s:/where%2FMaryland;lc:RUMSEY~8~1&mi=12&trs=373#>