



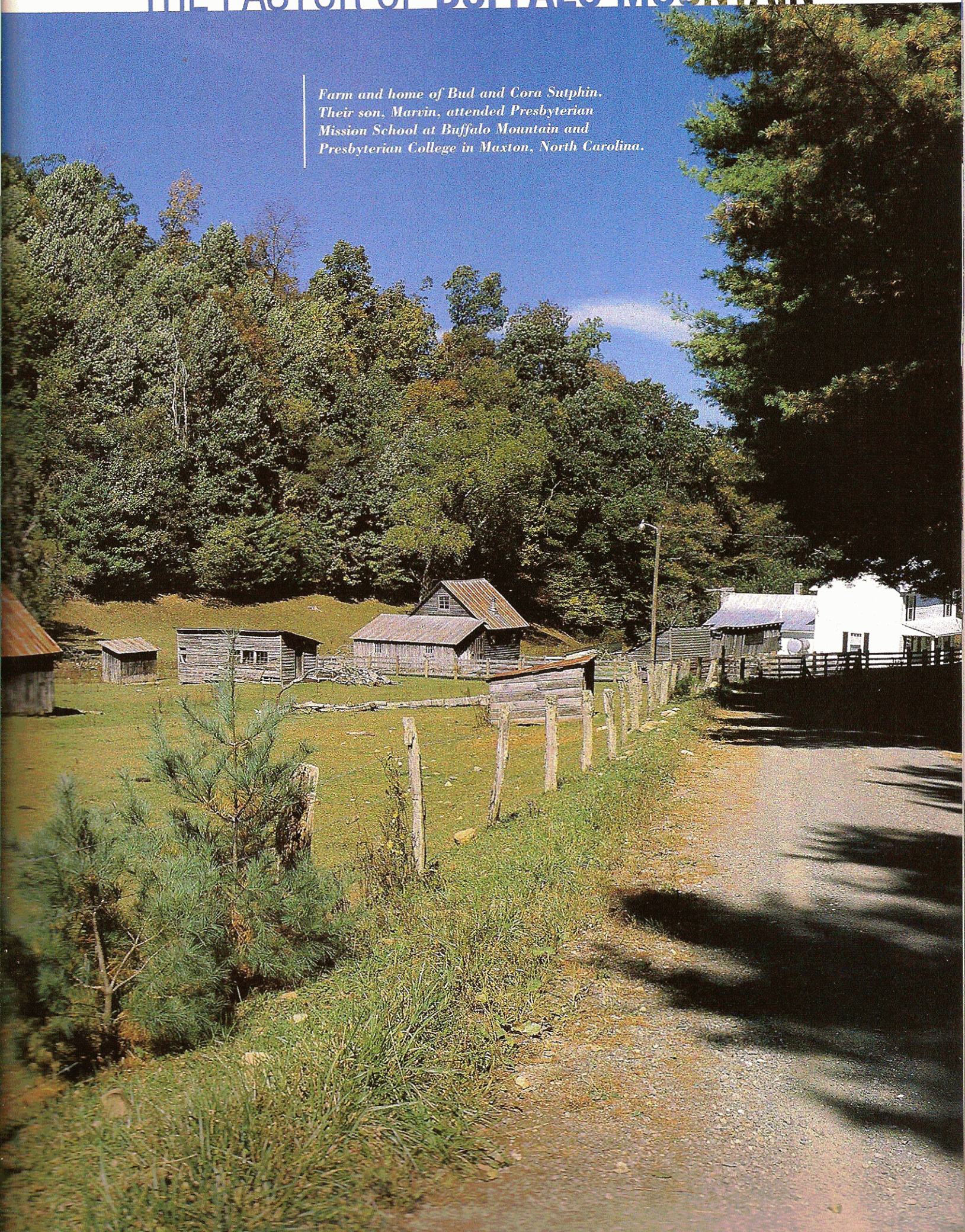
PRESBYTERIANS

a spiritual journey

DIRK WIERENGA

THE PASTOR OF BUFFALO MOUNTAIN

*Farm and home of Bud and Cora Sutphin.
Their son, Marvin, attended Presbyterian
Mission School at Buffalo Mountain and
Presbyterian College in Maxton, North Carolina.*



Bryan Childress lives with his wife, Paulene, on top of Buffalo Mountain in western Virginia. Buffalo Mountain is the tallest peak of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which span from southern Pennsylvania through the Carolinas. Bryan was born thirty miles away but spent his early adulthood on the mountain, and now, it is where he has chosen to retire.

To the casual observer traveling southwest of Roanoke along Interstate 81 or across the Blue Ridge Parkway, the rounded, tree-covered Buffalo Mountain provides a spectacular view of a countryside that has seen little change in decades. Living in the midst of the isolated beauty of the Blue Ridge are rugged individualists who have managed to survive countless economic hardships through sheer determination, often bending the law in order to feed their families.

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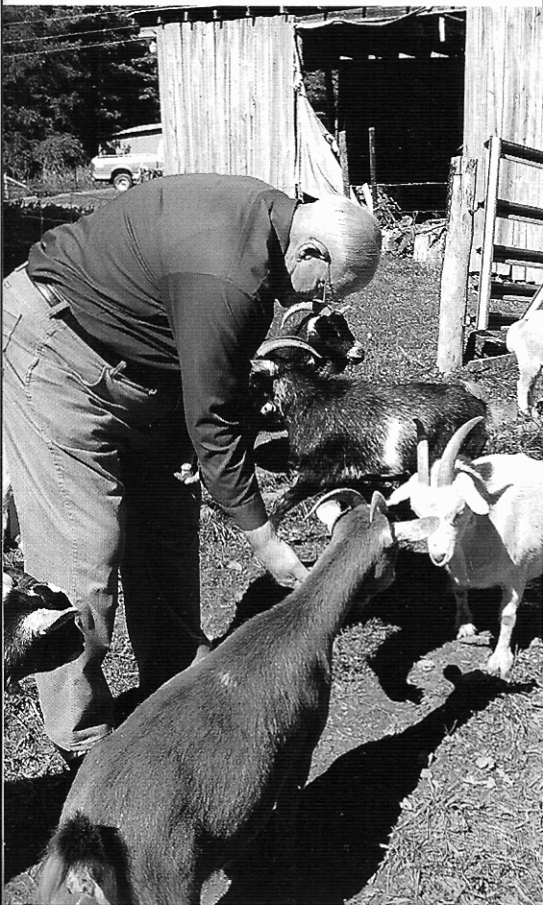
The fourth of eight children born to Bob and Lelia Childress, Bryan grew up in the shadow of his legendary father, whose life was chronicled in Richard C. David’s book *The Man Who Moved a Mountain*. “My dad was from a nonreligious family and grew up in these mountains in extreme poverty, living in a cabin with dirt floors,” Bryan relates. “The family made its living selling moonshine, which was not that uncommon in those days.

Growing up, his dad lived the worst kind life—he was a drunkard who spent his time drinking, fighting, and being immoral. Then one day he went to a tent revival meeting and became a Christian. He changed his ways, got married, started his own blacksmith shop, and was soon blessed with a son, followed by a daughter.”

His dad’s life changed again when a traveling Presbyterian minister named Roy Smith arrived and started a church. He got Bob involved in the church, and soon Bob felt called to the ministry. But there was a problem: Bob had never completed high school. So, every day he would ride by horseback to the local school with one child on the front of the horse and the other on the back. As Bryan remembers, “During the flu epidemic of 1917, my dad’s first wife died. Soon after that he met my mother, and over the next several years they had six more children.” After completing high school, Bob enrolled in Davidson College in North Carolina and worked his way through college selling apples and doing other assorted odd jobs. From college he went to Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, and after three years, he graduated.

Bryan recalls what came next. “Dad was in his thirties when he graduated from seminary. Dr. Peter Clark, who was the executive of the Presbytery

Bryan Childress’ family lives atop Buffalo Mountain in Virginia.



Mountain," continues his father's heritage.

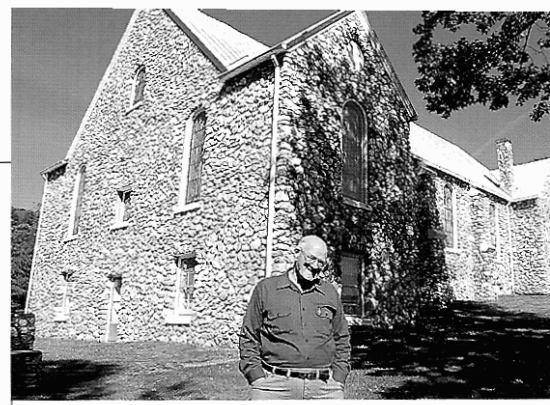
of Montgomery, got hold of dad and said, 'Childress, we've got some work on the mountains, enough work to kill you. We'll give you a living while we're killing you.' Dad took the call, and beginning in the spring of 1927, he started a church in a school that the presbytery had begun a few years earlier." In 1929, a rock-sided church, which is still in use, was constructed on Buffalo Mountain. But Bob wasn't finished yet. Over the next twenty years, he built five more rock-sided churches throughout Floyd county. This was no easy task, since very few roads existed in the area, and to get from one to another, he had to maneuver his Model T Ford over unpaved paths and through streams. In order to help solve the problem of how to get the people from their homes to the churches, Bob became involved in the politics of the county and was instrumental in getting the county to build better roads.

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in a cabin with dirt floors,"

Every member of the Childress family was involved in the church, and each one chose to stay active, with the two youngest sons going into the ministry. Bryan was the exception. "I was very shy, and even though my faith was strong, I chose to work at a variety of other jobs, finally working at my own sawmill." Then in the early 1950s, Bob suffered a series of strokes. He asked Bryan to help out by doing some of the preaching. "The most I'd ever done was to teach Sunday school," Bryan recalls. "I told him that I couldn't preach, but dad insisted by saying, 'Maybe you can't preach, but you can read scripture and you can also pray. You can fill in the rest of the time with hymns.' So while he recovered, I helped out, and soon I felt the call and decided to follow my father into the ministry."

However, in order to become an ordained pastor, Bryan needed to go to seminary. Now in his thirties, Bryan had not gone to college, so he sold all his possessions, including his home and the sawmill, and enrolled in King College. After college, he followed in his dad's footsteps and went to Union Seminary, where he graduated in 1957. A year earlier, however, his father had died from complications of the strokes that had afflicted him.

After Bryan was ordained, he became the pastor of the churches his father had started. Five years later, he took a call to be a pastor of a church in West Virginia, and then served a church in Virginia for twenty-one years until his retirement in 1986. Bryan and Paulene moved back to the family home on Buffalo Mountain when he retired. Soon he was asked to be the supply pastor at two of the churches his father had started. It is a role he continues to fill today. ■



*Above:
Standing in front of the rock-faced
Buffalo Mountain Presbyterian
Church built by his father, Bryan
Childress recalls growing up in the
mountains of Virginia.*

*Below:
Lacy Kemp is a charter member of the
Buffalo Church.*

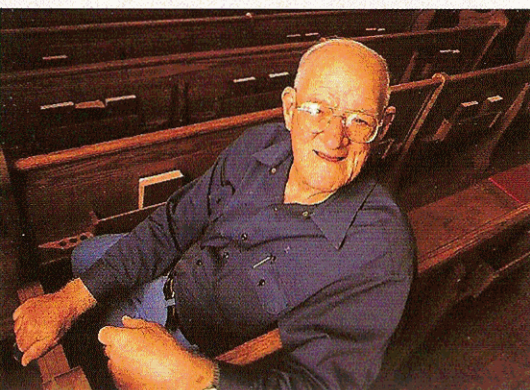


*"LORD, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations." (Psalm 90:1)*



The legacy of Bob Childress, “The Man Who Moved a Mountain.”

Bob Childress's son, Bryan, relaxes in the sanctuary of the Buffalo Mountain Presbyterian Church.



Bryan Childress remembers a time when his father burst in the door of their house saying that there was an elderly man living nearby who was sleeping on a bed of hay. The man was sick and near death. “Dad ran up to his room and took his own mattress off his bed and brought it to the man. As he brought it out to his car he said, ‘I’m not going to allow that man to die like that. He at least deserves the dignity of dying on a mattress.’ That was the kind of man that dad was, he would literally do anything for people in need.”

Another time, one of the girls in the choir got pregnant and left the community for a Salvation Army shelter in Roanoke. She gave birth there and decided to give up the baby for adoption. As Bryan remembers, “She was back in church the next Sunday and sang in the choir. After the worship service, one of the choir members cornered dad saying that the girl was not worthy of being in the choir and that she couldn’t believe that my dad would let her sing. My father turned to the lady and said, ‘You know, I thought the same thing. But then I turned around and looked at the other choir members and remembered what some of them had done. Then I thought about some of the things



John and Catherine Sutphin raised five daughters on their farm. John served as an elder at the Buffalo Church for nearly fifty years.

I've done, and I realized that if I told her to leave I'd also have to tell the rest of the choir to leave. I'd have to leave myself, and soon we'd have no choir or minister. So I decided to leave it alone.' After he said that, nobody ever suggested that the young lady leave."

Bryan also remembers the time his father and a couple of friends from Roanoke were out hunting. "Dad was a good shot and usually came home with something for the family to eat. Often he would come across a still, but would never disturb it. On this occasion, they came across someone's still, and one of the fellows hunting with my father suggested calling in the authorities. Dad told them that it was not their place to judge. So they left it alone. A few days later, a man came up to my father and said that he appreciated not being turned in. Dad asked where he was hiding, and the man said, 'Oh, I was behind a tree, and I had my rifle cocked.' My father told him that he didn't approve of the fact that he was making whiskey and that he needed to know that there was a better way. It wasn't long after that the man stopped making whiskey and started to come to church. That was the kind of effect my dad had on people." ■

Called to Dinwiddie

Bob Childress was once asked to preach to a congregation that was worshiping in a school in Dinwiddie, a small community in Carroll County, Virginia. At the end of the service, the people took a "love offering" in order to pay him for his travels. Bob refused to accept it, saying, "I don't want your money. I'm surprised at you folks, with the cars you drive and the homes you own, here you are worshiping in this school. Why don't you take this money and put it toward building a church." He left, and a few days later he received a letter from them saying, "You made us mad when you refused our money, but you also got us thinking. We'll take that money and start building a church if you'll help us."

Bob met with them several times, and soon they built their own rock-faced church. Bob often preached at the church until he became sick. As Bryan remembers, "Dad was getting older when he took on the Dinwiddie church. We told him he was taking on too much, but he insisted 'This is what the Lord wants me to do,' and that was that. Dad had a very strong will, and once he decided to do something there was no talking him out of it. But part of his legacy is that because he took on that task, the church in Dinwiddie is still a vital congregation."