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MONTE SANO MYSTIQUE

by
Walter S. Terry

*M*y memories of Monte Sano begin with visits to Grandfather and Grandmother Terry's summer home at the north end of the plateau. Dr. John Moorman and wife Dorothy now live on this choice lot overlooking Huntsville.

My grandparents' house, torn down years ago, was a sprawling wooden structure with a wrap-around porch laced with gingerbread. Its lack of physical conveniences, even those common to that era (the 1920s and early 1930s), was — to this dreamy, adventurous kid — part of its charm.

Across the sandy road was the ghost of Memphis Row, an empty (and no doubt haunted) relic of the glorious days (the 1890s) of The Monte Sano Hotel, host to the rich and the famous. A serpentine, two-rutted gravel road with a toll gate at its bottom was the only access to the mountaintop since the old choo-choo had stopped running sometime

before the hotel closed. The train, it has been reputed, was an adventure in itself and eventually lost out to poor odds of a safe ascent or descent.

At the summer house a hand-operated well provided water. Kerosene lit the lamps and fueled the cookstove. Primitive outhouses provided sanctuary for the more personal bodily functions and meditations of mind and soul. And adventure: I was almost disowned by my mother when at age four or five I slid — feet-first, happily for me if not for my shoes — into the muck of the two-holer. It was not, I discovered the hard way, a place for leaping around.

All of these strange and beautiful differences melded into a mystique that lives yet in some secret corner of the spirit. I was to write about it over the years, once as a story of father and son driving at night up that shadowed, twisting road in a Model-T Ford to visit the boy's sick grandmother. It was a fine opportunity to develop what I considered to be an unbreakable bond that every father and son should have.

During our summer days at this mountain retreat both my mother and dad traveled this road many times, sometimes afoot. My dad, and grandfather, often hiked up the road at night after closing their stores downtown. At least, afoot, the famous (or infamous, depending on how you looked at them) "Double S's" could be by-passed on short-cutting paths.

My father liked to tell of coming up the road one night with a side of beef in a horse-drawn wagon. He swore to his dying day that a snarling, wailing bobcat trailed close behind most of the way up that lonely road. (My dad was not a drinking man, though perhaps that night he wished he were.)

My mother, a young and celebrated beauty at the time, was walking the road on a hot day, fanning her face briskly to ward off a swarm of gnats. As she fanned she saw a man, also on foot, approaching and waving most enthusiastically in return. My mother, completely flustered, fanned even harder as they closed the gap between them and exclaimed in a way she prayed could not be misread, "My gracious, the gnats are something fierce today, aren't they?"

Bobcats for Dad, gnats for Mother. For me it was a broken arm. Somehow at age five or so, I managed to back-flip over the house's porch railing and break both bones in my right forearm. A grotesquely twisted

arm was bad enough, but the trip down the Double S's in my Aunt Ruth's Ford coupe was even more shocking. She, a 1920s flapper visiting for the summer, spared no thrill on that wild, gravel-spitting ride, Charleston-and-Black-Bottoming it all the way down to Dr. Grote's office.

Additional mystique, as I think of those days, was provided by the old man who lived in a hollow log beside a spring close to where the Burritt Museum driveway now begins. (This, too, I have used in my writings.)

Some of the names I associate with those old days on the mountain are Schrimsher, Hutchens, Johnson, Moorman, Yarbrough, Cooper, and Mimms. Earlier, there was the Reverend Rowe and his female seminary, and the yankee O'Shaughessy, who inhabited his own point of land at the southeast corner of the plateau.

Later, in my teen years, the adventurer's spirit led back to Monte Sano, to hikes and camp-outs on the mountain's lush west slope forests. This fairyland was easily accessible from our house at the far end of Locust Street (at that time only three houses from the city's eastern limit).

College and two wars and work in various places passed. Then, in 1954, I was able to return to fulfill a driving ambition to build a house atop the enchanted mountain of my childhood. With blood, sweat, tears and elation my wife and I erected a house of warmth and joy and filled it with six children, who, I believe, came to love the place and the home as much as we do.

This house, as well as this body, is where the soul resides — the former coming close to destruction in severe ice storms and a 1974 tornado that wasn't aware that "tornadoes never hit the tops of mountains."

I believe I can feel most comfortable about dying if it happens in or around this house. But in any case, the privilege of having lived in it, on this mountain, very likely will be enough.

