

It was a Dark and Stormy night . . .

By: Allen McKenna

Well, that's how our friend Snoopy might have described the 21 August, as several intrepid members of the Appalachian British Car Society met at Abingdon's Cracker Barrel restaurant, with designs on an adventure into the high country of Virginia's Grayson Highlands State Park. The rain gods had other plans for us, as it rained incessantly from dawn till past 9:00AM. Our knowledgeable member Al "The Weatherman" Bradley pointed out that if it was damp and dreary in the flatlands, then another two thousand feet of elevation gain would not put us above the clouds, but firmly in them, and we wouldn't see our hands in front of our faces, much less the spectacular mountain scenery.

So we held a caucus, right there on the front porch of the Cracker Barrel. Margaret Calcote had heard rumors of a Civil War Re-enactment in nearby Saltville, VA, and that met the approval of the rest of the group. Furthermore, being new territory to many of the group, foreigners all from that land of much personal freedom known as Tennessee, leadership fell to yours truly, who happens to be indigenous to Washington County Virginia. Not indigent, not always, anyway, but indigenous, meaning local to these parts.

And so we were off. Two of those darned Yapanese cars (the Calcote family Honda, Eddie Penland in his Miata that might possibly pass for an imitation MGB if you squint and contort your face just right), and two glorious little Britcars, Ben Bailey's MGB and my well-experienced TR6. Do the tops leak? If I was concerned, really, about keeping dry feet, I could drive an Explorer. Shucks, man, this is an ADVENTURE, first class, and as long as we are reasonably safe, let's roll.



Our designated route was one of much personal history for me, leaving Abingdon on the Hillman Highway, onto Old Saltworks Road, towards Meadowview. Left at Snavely's Corner, Right at Logan's Corner, Slow through the village of Clinchburg. Caution entering Plasterco, passing many, many former company row houses, and into downtown Saltville. As we had no clue where the Re-enactment was being held, we eased into the Town Parking lot for a pow-wow. And as if on cue, right across the street from us, the Museum of Middle Appalachia (MoMA, if we must use acronyms) threw open the doors, turned on the lights, and beckoned us inside. So we went—we are all curious souls, as you know.



MoMA is best left to two words: MUST SEE. Not purely homage to Saltville, but comprehensive enough to consider the history-cultural, geological, economic of the that forgotten valley province west of the well known I-81 corridor perhaps defined by the North Fork of the Holston River from its origins

in Bland County, through Smyth County and into Washington County. Sure, there were some darn big bones from some long dead native critter, but there were many insights into the native peoples of the village of Saltville. Of particular fascination was a relatively new exhibit examining the practice of concealment. Not black magic, not shoplifting, nor sorcery, but the cultural phenomenon of including articles of personal significance in the construction adjacent to a home's front entrance, as a warning to evil spirits.

For more info—head for the museum. Entry fee is a very reasonable three bucks, unless a person is antique and qualifies for that Seniority Discount—as Ben Bailey did on that day, his birthday. I'm sworn to secrecy—I have to let Ben tell just which birthday—but it's up there. The ride up there is spectacular, too. Perhaps we should include this on our repertoire of rides?

Now—our appetite for history was whetted. Our Curiosity was piqued—or peaked. Margaret and Alan Calcote found many, many, connections between Saltville and their hometown of Kingsport, with a little Abingdon connection thrown in.

Perhaps the greatest connection was that Kingsport was just that—the port, belonging to King, from where Saltville's namesake product, Salt, was shipped to the rest of the world. And the missing link became our challenge.

As our minds wondered back in time, we saw the formidable task of transporting the Saltville Salt to Kingsport. We learned in the museum that most likely, the salt traveled down the North Fork of the Holston River in either low draft boats, or perhaps along a riverbank tote road. And we saw challenge in re-tracing that route—so we did.

Leaving Saltville proper, we passed the remains of the Olin Chemical Works, and headed towards Allison's Gap. Turning left through Perryville, we headed downriver on VA 611. The first several miles were gravel, complete with an occasional pothole, but entirely passable at reasonable speeds. Crossing Route 80 (some may remember Route 80 as our route to Breaks Interstate Park, last summer), 611 becomes gravel again for a short while.

Observant motorists may have noticed Washington County's resident Amish community just across the river—but then the pavement resumed. We sped through the resort community of Mongle Springs, and intersected US 19, the Abingdon/Lebanon superhighway at the community of Holston. At this point the nomenclature changed to VA 802, the Mendota Road.



And thus we continued, through some of the county's most fertile river bottom farmland, to the community of Mendota, Virginia, complete with US Post Office, Medical Clinic, and Community center, and I don't mean all wrapped into one. This metropolis is big enough to support three separate such enterprises, and is poised to grow even more as the Bristol/Mendota rail-trail conversion is scheduled for development to rival the well known Virginia Creeper Trail. Stay tuned.

Leaving Mendota, we journeyed into Scott County, still along the river road. Of import is the well known Carter Family Fold music venue, more beautiful farmland, and proud, well kept homes of our neighbors and fellow citizens along the way.

This amazing journey ended at what we suspect was once a streetcar, parked alongside the road in downtown Hiltons Virginia. In spite of the rain (on and off all day) we were in agreement that the scenery was spectacular, the traffic was manageable, the company was good, and a good time was had by all.



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