

Surry Couple Finds Home on Mountain

WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL - AUGUST 2, 1973

By Arlene Edwards
Staff Reporter

PILOT MOUNTAIN — Bert Coleman would be one of the richest men in Surry County if he had a dollar for every time he has answered three questions:

—How high is the mountain?

—How far is it to the top?

—Do you have any water?
Coleman has answered these questions good news knows how many times a day since he and his wife, Nevada, (pronounced Kneevay-da) and six of their seven children moved to the mountain 25 years ago.

But he still spels off the answers — 2,421 feet above sea level, about two miles and sorry, no — just as patiently as he did that first time right after New Year's Day in 1948.

Coleman came to the mountain four years after J. W. Beasley bought it for \$14,500 from W. L. Spoon, the engineer-geologist who developed the present road to the top of the mountain.

And he stayed on five years ago when Beasley's widow sold it to the state for \$682,500 for a state park.

Coleman was the only helper the late Carl Ray Flinchum had during his first year as superintendent of the new state park.

And Thomas C. Ellis, the superintendent of state parks, says he was invaluable during the mountain's transition from a private tourist attraction to a free-to-the-public park.

He was so much help, Ellis says, that he and Mrs. Coleman will have a home on the mountain as long as they live and as long as his present

staff has any jurisdiction over the park.

Coleman is 76 years old now and has slowed down some. He wears four copper bracelets on his wrists and ankles, hoping to keep his arthritis in check, but he still opens and closes the gate everyday and picks up a lot of cigarette butts.

And he is still perfectly capable of getting tough with anyone who breaks a park rule. Armed, he says, with "just this big mouth."

Coleman likes people and he spends a lot of time telling the park's visitors about how buzzards are a "pore man's undertakers," about the "haint" that terrorized a sawmill camp near Level Cross and about the huge flag he used to fly on the mountain's famous rock pinnacle every Sunday and holiday.

The flag, which was nine feet high and fourteen feet wide, was his idea, but after climbing the pinnacle every Sunday and every holiday for two years he was delighted when a storm finally tore down the 50-foot-high flag pole.

Coleman had been a tobacco farmer before he took the job at the mountain, and he had planned to farm some of the open fields at the base of the mountain when he wasn't busy tending the gate.

But, he says, "I liked to killed myself running up and down the hill" to open the gate each time someone wanted to go up and come down the mountain.

So he worked out a deal with the Beasleys. He would tend to the tourists and his wife would tend to the tobacco.

Mrs. Coleman, who is now 74 and plagued by arthritis, recalls that she "worked like a mule" and would often be through setting or topping or suckering an acre of tobacco by the time the mailman came by about 8 a.m.

She and Coleman were married 53 years ago — 3½ years after he says he "went crazy."

He lived about four miles from her father's farm and "used to walk it three nights a week for 3½ years." "My wife," he says, "says I was crazy and I reckon I was — crazy about her."

They had their own farm on the Yadkin River for a while but "lost it in hard times." Then they began farming on rented land, most of it within sight of the mountain that was to become their home.

Their oldest son, James, who lives in Colfax, was already married and gone from home by the time they moved to the mountain. But the other six were still at home.

One of them — Miss Verta Coleman — still is, and the others — Mrs. Edna Gordon and Ben and Don Coleman at Pineville and Mrs. Lunda Denny and Rex Coleman of Pilot Mountain — are so close by they "can get together in minutes."

The Colemans have practically adopted the state park. Flinchum gave him the nickname of "Pappaw" — and they enjoy the friends and made of tourists from West Virginia to Florida.

But, he park gate finally when at night, "it's like a storm is over."



Bert and Nevada Coleman stand under the knob of Pilot Mountain.
Staff Photo by Jim Keith