

# WHAT HORACE KEPHART CAN TEACH US ABOUT SOLITUDE, SIMPLICITY

## Your Turn

Frances Figart  
Guest columnist

“Mountains! Think of them; speak of them; look upon them!... Here they are in all their majesty and abundance.”

These words were written in 1905 by Isaiah Kephart, who supported his son Horace in a retreat from society at a difficult time. They are words that could easily be said aloud by any of us as we look around and feel astounded anew each day when we see the mountains that we have made our home.

The mountains ground us, they give us energy, comfort, solace, and the strength to endure – and learn from – solitude. When Horace Kephart was at his wit’s end, he distanced himself from others and got back to the basics in these mountains.

“It is one of the blessings of wilderness life that it shows us how few things we need in order to be perfectly happy,” he wrote while living for about three years “alone in a little cabin on the Carolina side of the Great Smoky Mountains, surrounded by one of the finest primeval forests in the world.” He was hitting his stride creatively, working on *The Book of Camping and Woodcraft*, which would be published in 1906. In it he would invoke his mentor, known as Nessmuk, who wrote, “We do not go to the woods to rough it; we go to smooth it – we get it rough enough in town. But let us live the simple, natural life in the woods, and leave all frills behind.”

When Kephart went to the woods, he had been getting it rough enough in town. The complex story behind his choice “to leave the exhausted air of cities, the imprisoning walls, the din and strife, the jostling of unsympathetic crowds” is described in detail by George Ellison and Janet McCue in *Back of Beyond: A Horace Kephart Biography*. But when Kephart came to the Smokies, life became simple again.

Just as he described in *Camping and Woodcraft*, Kephart fished, shot rabbits and squirrels, cooked on a fire, fried cornbread, beans, ramps, and potatoes, and gathered chestnuts. He worked a garden and made his own rustic form of bitter coffee. From *Our Southern Highlanders*, we know that he also made friends near his cabin and visited them to purchase supplies and learn about their lives, so he was not completely isolated. But he spent a great deal of time



Horace Kephart is photographed in his cabin in what became Great Smoky Mountains National Park about 100 years ago.

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alone, with few possessions or distractions, which allowed him to write the books and magazine articles that would change the course of history.

At this time, the Smokies was a wilderness that had been taken from the Cherokee only 60 some years earlier. Settlers were moving in along with big logging companies, outlanders ready to exploit the land and its resources. What remained unharmed was the most spectacular old-growth forest in the east; but not far from any pristine parcel, a large swath would have been clear cut.

Kephart could see that if something wasn’t done, soon it would all be leveled. A seed of advocacy was being planted that would later sprout and finally blossom a decade later when he began to wield the mighty power of his pen in defense of a park. He would write countless magazine articles and persuasive letters, convincing both politicians and the public that the Smokies should be a park because of its inspiring

scenery, biodiversity, abundant springs and streams for camping and fishing, proximity to population centers, and room for millions of visitors. “I owe my life to these mountains,” he wrote, “and I want them preserved that others may profit from them.”

In advocating for preservation of the Smokies, Kephart made a substantial contribution to our region. In *Our Southern Highlanders* he advanced the nation’s understanding of Southern Appalachian people. *Camping and Woodcraft* shaped the outdoor recreation industry on a global scale. None of it would have been possible without a dramatic withdrawal from society and its conveniences.

Kephart made a choice: rather than end it all, he would start over in another place – in the mountains. He put into practice the concept of *Creatio ex nihilo*, the idea that something can come from nothing. When we are forced to slow down, live with fewer frills, conserve

our resources, smooth out the rough edges – then the distractions that normally subvert the creative process can fall away. In stillness, we have a rare opportunity, as Kephart did, for growth.

By 1928 Kephart’s efforts had succeeded in making it possible to create Great Smoky Mountains National Park. “It was a big undertaking,” he wrote, “and beset with discouragements of all sorts; but we’ve won!... Within two years we will have good roads into the Smokies, and then – well, then, I’ll get out.”

*Frances Figart is the Creative Director for Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and the editor of Back of Beyond: A Horace Kephart Biography, written by George Ellison and Janet McCue, and winner of the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award in 2019. Reach her at frances@gsassoc.org.*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Trump ignored pandemic warnings

To those of you who keep saying that this is not the time to assign blame. We have elected a president who has:

Ignored warnings from his Intelligence Department that a pandemic was likely. (November)

Ignored warnings from Dr. Carter Mecher, Sr. Medical Advisor of Veterans Affairs, that a pandemic was likely (January)

Ignored the National Security Council who urged the president to begin social distancing (early January)

Ignored both Navarro and Azar (both Trump appointees) who warned the president of the impending pandemic and Trump called them alarmists (January)

Said in a briefing on March 19, “Nobody knew there’d be a pandemic or an epidemic of this proportion.”

FINALLY, in mid-March, Trump officially recommended social distancing  
The list goes on.

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It is not political blaming nor politicizing to know just how this president has dealt with this crisis when you go and vote in November. There were clear guidelines as to handling something of this magnitude, and they were ignored. By this president.

*Suzanne Dunn, Mars Hill*

### 50th anniversary of Earth Day approaches

The coronavirus has changed the way millions of we humans are living and has taken a heavy death toll along the way. We are saddened and mourn those who have passed. However, as the 50th anniversary of Earth Day approaches (April 22), we should reflect on the more than 15 million other species with whom we share the planet. Often we are caught up with our own welfare at the expense of so many others.

While great environmental gains have been made since the early 1970s, e.g. Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, the current Administration is trying to eliminate many of these protections. We are currently witnessing Earth’s Sixth Great Extinction with more than 30 percent declines in global frog species and North American migratory bird populations. To quote Dr. Albert Schweitzer “Until he extends his circle of compassion to include all living things, man will not himself find peace.” Peace continues to be elusive.

*Mike Erwin, Hendersonville*

### GOP not looking after our best interests

I would like to thank our GOP representatives for looking after our best interests in these trying times. They could, with the press of a button or by raising their hand, have made sure that those of us who are now unemployed would have access to affordable health-care. But no – our contempt for the Kenyan Muslim trumps all and they voted against the expansion of Medicaid. So

those of us who are unable to work now find ourselves uninsured and looking down the barrel of bankruptcy, death or both in the event of an accident or illness.

At least the rich folks get a tax cut so that’s OK. Thank you, GOP, for looking after your rich supporters at the expense of the rest of us. See you at the ballot box, if we live that long.

*John Mycroft, Asheville*

### Mail delivery may impact 2020 elections

We know the United States Postal Service would not be facing its current budget crisis if not for the 2006 law requiring it to fully fund its pensions 75 years in advance. It’s the only business in the United States legally required to set aside tens of billions in cash for that far a time horizon. In theory, some of its retirees haven’t even been born.

And now, President Trump refuses to provide relief to the USPS. One can easily see through the cynical eye the bankrupting of the service and forcing it to relinquish mail delivery to private interests. Or worse, disrupting its constitutionally-defined function (see: Article I, Section 8, Clause 7) at a time when mail-in election ballots may be required as a contingency to in-person voting because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Senators Burr and Tillis must vote to provide the necessary funding to the USPS to avoid disruption of its services—services that potentially impacts our 2020 elections.

*Thomas Shafer, Asheville*

### A grateful and non-political post

My Mom and I just want to thank everyone involved with Asheville Citizen Times. Even though the news is bleak and the sports on the TV section is minute, we are so grateful that our paper is still in our driveway every morning. It gives us a sense of normalcy. We are tipping our steadfast delivery driver more these days as well. I worked for The Bos-

ton Globe for 15 years and know the commitment that is involved.

*JoAnn and Kathleen Corbin, Asheville*

### Trump similar to Ethelred the Unready

What leader’s moniker most reminds me of Donald Trump these days? I can think of no better one than the Medieval English sovereign Ethelred the Unready. Maybe Donald the Dilatory will do.

*Stephen Brown, Candler/Biltmore Lake*

### Time to end the endless wars

Our country has been at war with Afghanistan since the fall of 2001, and at war with Iraq since the spring of 2003. We have bombed between five to seven countries since these wars started, year in and year out.

The Bush regime started two major wars, and the Obama regime started three more wars while continuing Bush’s wars. The Trump regime has continued all these wars in spite of campaign promises to end them.

As a result of these wars, refugee camps are full of desperate and destitute people who are now facing a world pandemic. This will impact us and the whole world.

These wars, and the weapons and equipment made to fight them, have cost the U.S. taxpayers trillions of dollars. Those dollars were spent to kill poor brown people on the other side of the world who never killed anyone on U.S. soil. Those dollars were spent to destroy significant parts of our planet and to put ever-increasing carbon emissions into our atmosphere.

We could have spent this money to help ourselves. For example, to prepare for a pandemic. Or to fight climate change. Or for just about anything. In 2003, I wrote that ‘war is a failure of human intelligence and human compassion’. It has been a profound failure. It is way past time to end these endless wars.

*Susan Oehler, Asheville*