

# MOUNTAINS

## Come and explore the controversy, mystery and awe of Kephart's legacy



**Word from the Smokies**  
Frances Figart  
Columnist

Long before they met, George Ellison and Janet McCue each became obsessed with the life of Horace Kephart. One in North Carolina, the other in New York, the two researchers followed parallel lines of inquiry, each unaware of the other's existence throughout the 1980s and '90s.

You can learn about how they came to write "Back of Beyond: A Horace Kephart Biography" on a Lit Café Zoom meeting from 2:30-3:30 p.m. Oct. 8, hosted by the Western North Carolina Historical Association ([wnchistory.org](http://wnchistory.org)).

George Ellison's "Nature Journal" column has been a fixture in the Asheville Citizen Times since 1987. Winning the Wild South Roosevelt-Ashe award for Outstanding Journalism in Conservation, Ellison is a writer's writer. So, it is only natural that much of his life has been devoted to studying Kephart, an enigmatic writer who came from St. Louis to live in the Smokies in 1904, and who inspires admiration and awe, confusion and controversy to this day.

In graduate school at the University of South Carolina during the late 1960s, Ellison focused on the tradition of descriptive-humorous-sporting literature that flourished in the Southern states in the 19th and early 20th century. He was intrigued with how Mark Twain took the basic ingredients found in these materials and in 1883 wrote an American classic, "Life on the Mississippi." When Ellison discovered that Kephart's two fam-



**Horace Kephart explored this area, meticulously cataloging his observations, from 1904 until his death in 1931. He published several books and lobbied for the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.** SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN TIMES

ous publications — "Camping and Woodcraft" and "Our Southern Highlanders" — had carried that genre into the next century, he became increasingly curious about Kephart and started looking into his life and work.

At the same time, Janet McCue was working on her own in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York. She first became interested in Kephart on a backpacking trip to the Smokies in the 1970s when her husband's tattered edition of "Camping and Woodcraft" inspired the young hikers to locate the millstone

marking Kephart's Bryson Place campsite.

After graduating from the University of Michigan in 1979, McCue was offered a position as an academic librarian at Cornell University, where Kephart had been a graduate student one hundred years earlier, in the 1880s. While reading a book about women in librarianship, she noticed a footnote citing a letter from Kephart to a fellow grad student at Cornell. This led her to Brown University where she uncovered many previously unknown details about Kephart's

early life.

Having followed their common obsession for more than two decades with nearly 800 miles between them, in 2006 Ellison and McCue both found themselves at the Calhoun House in Bryson City to attend an event called Kephart Days. Once Ellison realized the extent of McCue's study and that she had many of the missing puzzle pieces he had long been seeking, he invited her to join him in writing an introduction to "Camping and Woodcraft" (Great Smoky Mountains Association, 2011). Their next joint endeavor would be co-authoring "Back of Beyond," published by Great Smoky Mountains Association, which would earn them the coveted Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award in 2019.

"George and Janet's talents and life experiences mesh perfectly in helping bring Kephart to life," wrote historian Daniel S. Pierce of UNC Asheville in the book's introduction, "[and make them] the perfect pair to do a biography on this legendary librarian, outdoorsman, and literary figure."

During the Oct. 8 Zoom interview, the coauthors will read excerpts from the biography, share behind-the-scenes details about their research, provide insights into their writing process, and disclose mysteries of Kephart's past still to be discovered. Learn more and register at [wnchistory.org/event/lit-cafe-back-of-beyond-a-horace-kephart-biography](http://wnchistory.org/event/lit-cafe-back-of-beyond-a-horace-kephart-biography).

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## Tillis, Cunningham spar over Supreme Court, absentee voting

**Bryan Anderson**  
ASSOCIATED PRESS/REPORT FOR AMERICA

RALEIGH — Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina said in a debate Thursday night with Democratic challenger Cal Cunningham that the president's nominee to the U.S. Supreme Court — if appointed — should not recuse herself in any potential cases involving the 2020 presidential election.

"I don't believe that she should (recuse herself), but that's a decision that she'll make based on the facts," Tillis said of President Donald Trump's choice, Amy Coney Barrett, who awaits the Senate confirmation process. "It's a very well-documented recusal process, and I trust Amy Coney Barrett and all the nine justices to act appropriately."

Concerns about the Supreme Court and mail-in voting in this year's presidential election took center stage at Thursday night's debate.

Cunningham declined to say whether he thinks Barrett is qualified to be on the nation's highest court. He said that, if elected, he would reserve judgment until meeting her.

"I would meet with her and I would put her through hearings and give her a job interview before I would give her my vote," Cunningham said. "The fact of the matter is that stands in stark contrast to what Sen. Tillis has proposed."

The day after Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's death, Tillis told Trump supporters gathered at a rally in Fayetteville that he'd support any of the



**Democratic challenger Cal Cunningham, left, and U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., greet each other after a televised debate Thursday in Raleigh.** GERRY BROOME/AP

justices Trump had on his list of potential candidates.

In 2016, Tillis opposed then-President Barack Obama's nomination of Judge Merrick Garland, arguing that "the voice of the American people should be heavily weighted in that decision and their voice will soon be heard on Election Day."

On another issue, Tillis said he believes absentee ballot rule changes

pushed by North Carolina Democrats have "set the groundwork for lawsuits" in that state.

Tillis, who is voting by mail this year and has praised North Carolina's absentee voting process throughout the election cycle, said he is concerned about recent changes.

Updated guidance unanimously passed last week by the North Carolina State Board of Elections is being chal-

lenged in state and federal court.

The two Republican members of the five-member board resigned shortly after receiving substantial pushback from state GOP leaders. The state's Republican Party said Democrats misled the members into supporting the easing of certain voting procedures.

At the center of the debate is a six-day extension for counties to receive absentee ballots postmarked by Election Day and a process in which voters who filled out their ballots without the necessary witness information could receive an affidavit to correct the problem — rather than having to fill out an entirely new ballot.

"It's a dramatic change that I hope can be halted," Tillis said.

Federal Judge William Osteen said Wednesday that the affidavit directive doesn't comply with a ruling he issued in August upholding the need for a witness because it would effectively eliminate the witness requirement mandated under state law. Osteen's criticism of the memo the state elections board issued last week prompted the group to announce on Thursday it would halt plans to resolve ballot issue with voter affidavits.

Cunningham signaled support for the new process because he wants to ensure all eligible votes can be counted.

"We want people to participate, and I have confidence that we will end up in a place where folks will and should have confidence in the outcome," Cunningham said.

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### Postal information

Citizen Times, USPS #236-000, ISSN #0336-0000, is published Monday through Sunday at 14 O. Henry Ave., Asheville, NC 28802. Periodicals postage paid at Asheville, NC 28802.  
Postmaster: Send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 62670, San Angelo, TX 76906.