

MOUNTAINS

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Artist Elizabeth Ellison is pure Smokies



Frances Figart
Word from the Smokies

Readers of the Asheville Citizen Times have enjoyed the Nature Journal column by regional author and naturalist George Ellison since the 1980s. His work is often accompanied by that of his wife, Elizabeth Ellison, a North Carolina artist whose natural history documentation and inspired landscape paintings represent the Smokies region in a way that no other artist has been able to replicate.

Born in 1942, Elizabeth grew up on a farm in Caswell County, one of 11 children of J. Frank and Evelyn Moorefield. Her father was a successful attorney, surveyor, and architect who held degrees from Georgia Tech in engineering and Wake Forest in law. Her mother managed the household and the family businesses.



Ellison

“We had the freedom to explore and learn on 125 acres. My love for nature and animals began there,” she said in an article about the power duo cowritten by Janet McCue and Bob Plott and published in the Spring 2021 issue of “Smokies Life” magazine.

The first time George saw Elizabeth, she was commuting to Averett College in Danville, Virginia, from her home across the Dan River near Milton, North Carolina. “She was driving her brother’s jet-black T-Bird trimmed in red,” George recalled. “It didn’t have a muffler, so I heard her coming before I saw her. When I did, it was, from my perspective, pretty much a done deal.”

Elizabeth had known that she wanted to be an artist from an early age, and she received ample encouragement and family support to follow her dreams. After obtaining her associate arts degree from Averett, she faced a creative crossroads.

“I had to either continue my education pursuing some sort of undergraduate degree or become a full-time artist

testing and honing my skills,” she said. “It wasn’t a difficult decision.”

Fast forward to the early 1970s, when the young Ellison family found themselves able to choose to live anywhere they wanted. As explained by Plott and McCue, “Elizabeth wanted to focus on painting, and George was still set on becoming a full-time writer. He had been visiting the Smokies, doing research for a biographical profile of Horace Kephart, a writer of some consequence in the tradition of regional descriptive writing and one of the founders of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. George suggested that they give the Bryson City area in Swain County, North Carolina, a try.”

The couple remembers walking a trail 4 miles west of town that they assumed was restricted to park service lands. Suddenly, a rusty private gate opened into a steeply sloped cove traversed by a creek and surrounded on three sides by the national park. The house they saw there was more shack than cabin — but livable.

“Such an opportunity galvanized Elizabeth,” wrote Plott and McCue. “The next day she located the owners.” Within 24 hours of discovering it, they had rented the property, thinking they’d only be there for the summer, cooking on a woodstove and reading by lamp-light. But the southern boundary of GSMNP has turned out to be the perfect place for a painter and author-naturalist to set up what they call their “permanent camp.”

Here at Lands Creek, on a small plot of nature they nurtured and improved with a new cabin, Elizabeth carved out a substantial career as a watercolorist, papermaker, and illustrator, having for many years owned and operated a studio-gallery situated just off the town square in Bryson City. Her major exhibitions include shows at the North Carolina Arboretum, Berea College and the UNC Botanical Gardens at Chapel Hill.

If you saw the 2000 film “Songcatcher,” you may have seen Elizabeth’s work and didn’t know it. “The film crew was looking for an artist in North Carolina to do the artwork for Alice, the artist in the movie,” Elizabeth explained. “Lance Holland, who lived in neighboring Graham County, and served as the location



“Big Rock in Deep Creek” is an oil painting owned by Elizabeth Ellison’s student Alice Hart because it depicts the first stream that she and her husband, Bill Hart, visited on their first hike in the Smokies. PHOTO PROVIDED

manager, told them about me and my studio/gallery in Bryson City.”

Elizabeth created a series of sketches and watercolors in various stages of completion for the film. She got to be on the set twice, but sadly didn’t get to meet Aidan Quinn.

“It was exciting!” she said. “I’d never been around movie actresses and actors before. I was impressed with how hard they work, and how seriously they took their jobs.”

Elizabeth still shares her knowledge through formal classes. Retired educator Alice Hart has enrolled in several of Elizabeth’s workshops at the NC Arboretum.

“Through her talent, insights and example, I began to closely observe details and patterns in nature,” Hart said. “Elizabeth’s artistry as a painter and as a teacher instilled confidence in me that I could capture the beauty of the natural world.”

Both George and Elizabeth Ellison were named Blue Ridge Naturalists of the Year by the Blue Ridge Nature Network and Bryson City Business Citizens

of the Year in 2013. Aside from illustrating most of George’s work, Elizabeth continues to influence his writing with her intuitive ability to embrace the natural world. The talented duo has no plans for retirement.

“Our collective bond has been strong through the years because we allowed each other the individual space and opportunity to refine our own individual artistic voices,” said Elizabeth. “Finding our personal sanctuary on Lands Creek was undoubtedly more important to our personal and professional success than words can convey. There is no place like it.”

Elizabeth Ellison’s gallery is at 155 Main St. in Bryson City. Learn more online at elizabethellisongallery.com.

Frances Figart is the editor of “Smokies Life” magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at SmokiesInformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.

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