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**UNTOLD STORIES FROM
AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS**

BY SUSAN SHUMAKER

GEORGE MASA

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GEORGE MASA

Writing in Japanese on January 18, 1915, Masahara Iizuka¹ penned in his journal “Launched out on an adventure today.” That day, he’d left San Francisco on a train headed for New Orleans. The journey across the continent would eventually end in Asheville, NC, a town he called home for the next two decades. He would start by working as a laundry hand at the Grove Park Inn and end a crusader in the cause to create the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Appalachian Trail, corresponding with presidents and multimillionaires and working closely with government officials and leading conservationists. A wisp of a man, Masa stood an inch or two above five feet and weighed little more than 100 lbs, but possessed a spirit and ambition as big as the mountains he loved.

Before Asheville

Many years after his arrival in North Carolina, Masa told a newspaper reporter that he’d been born in Osaka, Japan and had studied mining engineering at Tokyo’s Meiji University. He claimed to have arrived in America at the age of 24. Another newspaper report released after Masa’s death placed his birth in 1881, stating he’d come to the United States for further studies—mining engineering at the University of California²—and had severed ties with Japan following the death of his father, a jeweler. He was reported as having adopted Christianity as a college student in Japan (Bonesteel 2; Lathrop 3; Hart 250–251).

Despite Masa’s statements, the actual events of his life before arriving in Asheville are shrouded in mystery. His birth date was estimated by friends after death and has never been verified. Meiji University has never offered courses in mining engineering or anything similar. There are no immigration or ships’ records confirming the passage of anyone named Masahara Iizuka to the United States³ and institutions he is said to have attended in the United States have no record of his enrollment or graduation. The information Masa gave for the 1920 and 1930 national census revealed further inconsistencies: In that decade, he had somehow aged 16 years and his immigration date had slid eight years, from 1914 back to 1906 (Lathrop 4; Hart 251; Bonesteel 2–3).

During his brief stay in New Orleans, Masa recorded a small income in his journal as well as expenses. He makes reference to filing a “formal report,” but it is not known to whom or why, or from whence his income came. After four months of no entries came this statement, in July, indicating that the source of his income was gone:

.....
¹ Masa’s first name is sometimes spelled Masabara and his surname, Izurka. In early correspondence, Masa himself signed his name Masahara Iizuka.

² In some articles Masa is said to have attended the University of Colorado.

³ Paul Bonesteel searched ships logs and immigration records from 1900 through 1915 for the most commonly used ports in the U.S., including San Francisco, Seattle, Miami, New Orleans, and New York, and found no record of Masahara Iizuka.

Now I have to raise money. It can't be helped, for I have just enough money to travel but not [a] penny extra. —George Masa, July 1915

The Grove Park Inn

On July 10, 1915, Masa came to Asheville by train. An employment agency had arranged an interview for him in the rapidly growing mountain town, a haven of the rich and famous and for those suffering from tuberculosis. Masa had very little money and only a bit more English. He is reported to have been traveling with a group of Austrian students (Bonesteel 3; Hart 251).

Masa was hired to work in the laundry room of the Grove Park Inn, the creation of pharmaceutical tycoon Edwin Wiley Grove. The inn had opened just two years earlier and boasted 150 rooms, an enclosed atrium, and a magnificent view of the mountains. Grove's son-in-law, Fred Seely, who served as the inn's manager, had designed Grove Park Inn, patterning it after lodgings at Yellowstone National Park. He intentionally recruited a group of foreigners, including Masa, to work at the hotel in an attempt to provide interest and diversion for the wealthy clientele (*Asheville Citizen-Times* 1/22/1961).

I visited Grove Park Inn in Asheville at 11:50 AM and had an interview with the manger, Mr. Seeley . . . To make a long story short, they took me. . . The hotel is huge and true to its claim to be the biggest in the world; such an elaborate, magnificent building. —George Masa, July 11, 1915

As this is a mountainous area, it will be cool enough to require a blanket in the autumn. No mosquitoes! An excellent place to live; nothing can be better. Now if I only I . . . make a lot of money. —George Masa, July 12, 1915⁴

Sometime after his arrival in the U.S., Masa changed his name. He told the Creasmans, a family with whom he lived in Asheville, that he'd adopted the name George when he converted to Christianity in Japan, discontinuing the use of his first name, Iizuka. He shortened his surname to Masa "for convenience" (Hart 251; Lathrop 3).

With his Austrian companions, he took extensive trips into the mountains surrounding Asheville. When the Austrians left, Masa stayed on. Within months Masa had been promoted to the valet desk at the Grove Park Inn where he enjoyed constant exposure to the inn's guests. According to historian Rob Neufeld, Masa got to know the Vanderbilts, whose home—Biltmore—was nearby, and soon became one of the "darlings" of the elite Grove Park clientele, fitting in well with Seely's attempt to provide unusual and romantic experiences for his guests. Masa was skilled at presenting himself in a way that was both deferential and interesting. "He was a treasure," Neufeld says, "and they sought those kinds of treasures" (Bonesteel 4).

Seely, a consummate promoter, knew that photographs could portray to the wider world an image of the inn and its guests that would, in turn, generate more business. He let Masa use his camera to photograph the inn's clientele at the resort and on picnics in the neighboring mountains. Masa's clear skill as a photographer and the quality of his film processing indicate

4 There's little of interest in Masa's early journal, which is primarily an accounting of his expenditures.

that he had received previous training and was not, as others might have assumed, an amateur (Bonesteel 5).

Masa soon began a side business processing film and printing photographs from the guests' own cameras at the inn and at other local hotels. Eventually, he hired an assistant, young Blake Creasman, to pick up rolls of film after school (Hart 252).

Moved by ambition, Masa wrote Seely in November 1916, saying he had tired of hotel work and was making plans to leave. Shortly thereafter, he changed his plans and stayed on. In May of 1917, he again prepared to leave, this time in search of precious metals. He wrote:

[I] am awful sorry to say "Good bye" . . . As you know, [I] am a student who has an ambition, who wishes good future, and I know I am not the man who suitable the position as valet, it is so far away from my purpose. . . . I made up my mind to go to Middle West states and get lessons in metal prospecting. . . . If God favor me, I will find some mine. When that chance comes, I will let you know first! I never forget your kindness through in my life. —George Masa to Miss L. Scott (Seely's secretary), 5/4/1917

After a short time in Colorado Springs, Masa had had enough of the gold rush. He wrote again to Seely:

I had a good time seeing the beauty of nature. . . . I had a fine time hiking, sure the country is wonderful. . . . When you find a position to suit me, except valet, please tell me. I am glad come back to work but I have spent all my money for vacation so please let me have about couple months wages in advance. —George Masa to F. L. Seely, 6/10/1917 and 7/4/1917⁵

Seely sent Masa \$40 with the promise of a better job and a month's vacation each summer, with half-pay (Bonesteel 6).

Masa returned to the Grove Park Inn as head porter and later worked as a craftsman in the woodcarving shop of Biltmore Industries, acquired by Seely from the Vanderbilt family. In the fall of 1917, Masa moved in with the family of Oscar Creasman, a carpenter (Bonesteel 6, Lathrop 3).

Commercial Photography

In the spring of 1918, Masa left the Grove Park Inn permanently. After traveling through Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, DC, he returned to Asheville in October and took a job with a prominent local photographer, Herbert Pelton. Pelton and Masa became business partners, forming a company called "The Photo-Craft" and setting up shop at 1 1/2 Biltmore Avenue.

I having job at Pelton Studios and learned so many things—all branches of photography. Beside this I still have Kodak finishing business. —George Masa to F. L. Seely, 2/25/1919

5 The sentence "I had a fine time hiking . . ." is from Masa's 7/4/1917 letter; all other content of this quote is from his 6/10/1917 letter.

Less than a year later, in December 1919, Pelton moved to Washington, DC, and the partnership dissolved. Masa became sole owner of the business. He changed the name to Plateau Studios (Bonesteel 7–8; Hart 252).

I am glad [to] inform you that I left Pelton Studios and start [a] business myself, as named the Plateau Studios. . . . I ordered a camera about five weeks ago but still it does not come yet! —George Masa to F. L. Seely, 12/13/1919

Masa took on all kinds of work, from portraiture to ambulance chasing, and drew a diverse clientele. A 1953 article in *The State* magazine described the business as “a flourishing commercial news and newsreel service.” As his reputation grew, he began to assemble a large number of scenic photos, selling them as prints and postcards to the tourist trade, including via mail order. The Asheville Chamber of Commerce produced brochures promoting investment and tourism, illustrated with Masa’s photos. He promoted his own business through advertisements in local publications, inviting readers to inspect his large collection of scenic photos (Hart 252; Lathrop 3; Bonesteel 9).

Landscape Photography

In search of new vistas to capture on film and sell to tourists, he was drawn farther and farther from Asheville. It was this quest that eventually brought him into the Smokies. Despite the excellent quality of his work, Masa was never quite satisfied and continually sought even more perfect photos. His clients were often amazed at the amount of time he logged to ensure he’d captured the best possible image. He would sit, sometimes for hours, patiently awaiting just the right quality of light and placement of clouds before making his exposure. Newspaper accounts after his death claimed that Masa would frequently hike ten, fifteen, or twenty miles in search of a suitable camera location (Hart 255; Bonesteel 9; *Asheville Citizen* 6/22/1933).

Historian Gil Leebrick reflects on Masa’s approach:

George Masa was concerned about and had a sense of aesthetic which is apparent in the framing of his pictures, waiting for the light and waiting for weather effect. [He] was taken with the outdoors and he had a sensibility about the mountains. He possessed the Japanese aesthetic which led him to be outdoors. He had a questioning mind, searching for trails and trail details. All this came from internal being more than an intellectual quest. —Gil Leebrick, in an interview with William Hart, 7/23/1996 (Hart 255)

Barbara Ambler Thorn, a good friend and hiking companion, described Masa’s patience and perseverance:

He carried a tripod and big heavy camera on his back. He would want the clouds a certain way and he waited for clouds to get that way—really, truly—the man was an artist. —Barbara Ambler Thorn, recorded interview 6/3/1996 (Hart 255)

Eleanor Stephen recalled a story told by her father, Charles E. Waddell, who'd hired Masa to photograph a recently completed dam for the City of Asheville's Bee Tree reservoir. Masa carefully composed his shot and then, just before taking the picture, reached up, grasped the branch of a dogwood tree, and pulled it down to frame the scene (Hart 256).

By 1924, Masa's interests had shifted from running a photography studio to exploring the mountains, although he was not, according to hiking companions, a true woodsman. He was known for starting a multiple-day hike packing practically nothing but photographic equipment, often without sufficient cover for warmth or food to keep from being hungry. When friends protested his single can of caviar packed for a trip, he would say that his food must take up "little room" (Lathrop 4).

Masa sold Plateau Studios to a photographer who had worked for him, Ewart Ball.⁶ Although Masa relocated his business to Biltmore, NC, in August 1924, changing its name to the Asheville-Biltmore Film Company, his growing love of the mountains drew Masa to spend most of his time on the movement to preserve the Smokies as a national park. His photos quickly became instruments of the cause, later accompanying the writings of his friend, Horace Kephart (Hart 252; Bonesteel 9).

Kephart and Masa

As Masa's reputation as a scenic photographer grew, he received an increasing number of requests from writers for images to accompany their articles about the area. It was in this way that George Masa came to meet Horace Kephart, a man who would become his closest friend. Paul Bonesteel believes that Kephart and Masa met through Paul Fink, a GSM National Park advocate on the Tennessee side of the mountains (Hart 253).⁷

There is much evidence to suggest that Masa was profoundly influenced by his meeting with Kephart. He became a true student of the mountains, learning about the plants, animals, and history of the Smokies from "Kep" and from the books he recommended. The two are described as "constant companions," taking numerous trips into the mountains, gathering photographs and information by day and exchanging ideas and plans over the campfire by night (Bonesteel 14).

The two often relied on locals for information about the portion of the mountains they knew best. One such informant was cattle farmer and mountain guide Charlie Conner.

One night, he and Kephart and Masa were sitting at the fire and Charlie took off his shoe and he said, "I'll tell you what, this bunion feels about as big as that knoll over there!" So, Kephart and Masa named it Charlie's Bunion. And it still stands on the map today. —Ed Corpening, Conner's nephew (Bonesteel 14)

⁶ The sale preserved hundreds of Masa's photographs from the period. Ball Photographic is still in business in Asheville. Masa operated under various business names after moving to Biltmore, including A-B Photo Service and Asheville Photo Company (Hart 252)

⁷ In hopes of verifying this, I tracked down the letter sent from Kephart to Fink asking for names of new photographers in the area (1/25/1922); Fink's response was not among his papers, but could be with the Kephart papers at Hunter or Pack.

Kephart and Masa, along with forester Verne Rhodes, executive secretary of the North Carolina Park Commission, were engaged in the verification and naming of geographic features in the Smokies as the official North Carolina Nomenclature Committee, under the direction of the Department of the Interior. They recorded every mountain, river, cove, creek, and valley that fell within the park boundary on the North Carolina side, scouting remote areas, examining existing maps (such as they were), interviewing residents, and immersing themselves in the history of the Cherokee and the white settlers. From this work, the Department of the Interior would make an accurate map of the future national park (Hart 258; Bonesteel 15).

Kephart was impressed by the perseverance and dedication of Masa, who would often spend weeks alone in the mountains.

During the past summer, George Masa, the Japanese photographer of Asheville, has been exploring the wildest and most rugged parts of the Great Smoky Mountains, charting the trails through the primeval forest of the National Park area, where there are any trails, and often boring his way through untracked jungles, scaling precipitous mountain sides, delving rocky defiles, where no sign has been left by man.

On all of his trips, George has carried an 8x10 view camera. By judicious use of various ray filters and an uncanny skill in timing exposures, he has overcome the difficulties of haze and cloudy weather which often balk an amateur photographer in the Smokies. The result is a series of about fifty views of wild mountains and gorges, deep forests and naked crags, trout streams and waterfalls, camp scenes, "close-ups" of blooming shrubs and wilderness flowers, the like of which is not to be found elsewhere than in Masa's collection.

I have been out with George on several of his trips. —Horace Kephart, "Indian Writings" (1-2)

Masa drew detailed sketches to help with map making and painstakingly labeled each photograph. He corrected errors on older maps, requested U.S. Geological Survey Sheets for reference, and frequently corresponded about his findings with Appalachian Trail officials and the USGS. In addition to Kephart, Masa would also hike with supporters from what he referred to as "the Tennessee side": banker and avid outdoorsman Paul Fink and photographer Jim Thompson. The two were members of the nomenclature committee for the Tennessee side of the park. Like Kephart and Rhodes, Fink and Thompson relied heavily on Masa's work, which was unrivalled in its detailing of every nuance of the terrain (Hart 258; Bonesteel 15).

You certainly have done a wonderful piece of work in this map-making I . . . wish we had someone on the Tennessee side as capable and willing as you have proved yourself. —Paul Fink to George Masa, 3/15/31

Finally, on December 30, 1931, Masa wrote to Albert Pike of the U.S. Geological Survey, saying he was sending the "Committee's final decision" regarding "the names of Mountains, Ridges, and Creeks." This phase of the project complete, Masa continued to correspond with his Tennessee peers and the USGS about nomenclature issues until his death (Hart 260).

The obsession with mapmaking apparently did not begin with Masa's appointment to the Nomenclature Committee, however, but upon his arrival in Asheville in 1915. Lola Love interviewed Masa for a newspaper article that appeared August 25, 1929. In it she describes a map Masa had placed on his studio wall. Whenever Masa visited and photographed a new location, he would mark it on the map with a pin. Eventually, the map was literally covered with pins, along with numerous photographs and other records. "This map is his text book," Love says, "and the visual expression of the plans and dreams which he has made for his work" (Love).

In the same article, Love describes Masa himself, calling him "an artist at heart [who] . . . wants to express by means of his art something of [the] feeling of worship which contemplation of nature has inspired in him." "It is refreshing," she wrote, "to find a man who devotes all his time and his thought to work because it means to him the fulfillment of an ideal."

He is a slight, active man, with the light, springing step of one who is accustomed to walking much in the out-of-doors. But when he is talking to you he sits quietly, only his face portraying the animation of his mind, and only his hands giving indication of the enormous amount of nervous energy which is his. The hands are slender, making quick, graceful motions to illustrate some point which he's making or (a characteristic gesture) combing through his short black hair when he is trying to express some point which defies expression. —Lola Love, 1929

Masa was apparently an irascible character, too. Kephart, in a letter to Paul Fink, quotes Masa, when discussing Smokies nomenclature, as uttering phrases like "that damn Porter Gap that not gap" and "Who hell call this place for cave?"⁸

Virginia Lathrop, writing in 1953, observes that Masa and Kephart made a curious pair:

Kephart, the woodsman who found delight in camping, in sleeping under the stars, challenging nature at its most rugged; Masa, the artist, content to roll himself in a blanket under the nearest boulder and exist on a jar of caviar in order to sit the day out waiting for a picture. —Virginia Lathrop 1953 (4)

Masa's trademark dress while hiking was khaki pants tucked into high-topped boots and a bandana tied around and over his head. Frequently while hiking, he would push part of an old bicycle—cut off just behind the front fork so that only the wheel and handlebars remained—in front of him. Having attached an odometer to the wheel, he used this homemade cyclometer to measure the distance he traveled and the distance between landmarks—critical to the map-making in which he was involved (Hart 256; Parris 9/22/1989).

In his memoir, Tom Alexander—a former timber evaluator who ran a fishing camp in the pre-park Smokies—tells a favorite story of leading a young and exhausted hotel clerk into his camp:

8 Horace Kephart to Paul Fink, 3/13/1931; in Kephart Letters folder.

My worn out companion had just finished wondering for the dozenth time how in the hell a horse could go over such a trail when he looked up to notice a man coming down the trail. It was George Masa coming down from Three Forks, a red bandana outlining his dark face, pushing his trail-measuring rig before him. The hotel clerk's mouth dropped open, his eyes widened, "My God," he gasped, "yonder comes an Indian riding a bicycle!" —Tom Alexander (Hart 257; Parris 9/22/1989)⁹

A profound respect for and interest in the Cherokee was another of Masa and Kephart's common bonds. They frequently consulted with natives as they sought appropriate names for geographic features in the Smokies. Masa attended and even participated in the annual fall Cherokee fair on their reservation west of Asheville. He was the first to film these Cherokee celebrations and ceremonies using a motion picture camera. At the time, Masa was under contract with Pathé and Paramount as a newsreel photographer and, for a while, was their sole representative in North Carolina, South Carolina, and parts of Georgia and Tennessee. One of his reels, dating from the early 1930s, corresponds with an agreement Masa had made with the park's first ranger to shoot scenic footage (Lathrop 3).

Fighting for the Smokies

Masa, like Kephart, immersed himself in the campaign to save the Smokies. He conducted on-going correspondence with top government officials, including Arno Cammerer, sending them detailed letters, maps, and photographs to aid in the cause. Cammerer wrote Masa, on March 21, 1930:

It seems that everybody has been telling me about your fine spirit and your helpfulness and your love of the outdoors. . . . I have admired your photographic work very much. —Arno Cammerer, 3/21/1930

When Cammerer met with John D. Rockefeller, Jr., on August 4, 1927 he "filled [Rockefeller's] briefcase with all the photographs of the big Smokies I had collected." It is reasonable to assume that Masa's pictures were among them, although the earliest correspondence I've found from Cammerer to Masa is dated July 22, 1929.

Mr. Kephart has just sent me a number of unusually fine photographs which you took within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park area, and I appreciate your thoughtfulness in making them available for me very much indeed.

I hope to have the pleasure before long of dropping by your studio and seeing your enlargements and color work, in addition to the other pictures you have taken of the studios. —Arno Cammerer to George Masa, 7/22/1929¹⁰

⁹ Tom Alexander, Jr., and Jane Alexander, Editors, *Mountain Fever* (Asheville, NC: Bright Mountain Books, 1995), p. 57.

¹⁰ In March 1930, however, the two men had still not met in person, although Paul Fink writes that he had shown more of Masa's photos to Cammerer. See Cammerer to Masa, 3/21/1930, and Fink to Masa, 3/11/1930.

When Rockefeller visited Grove Park Inn in November 1928, Masa took his photograph and sent a print to the multi-billionaire in New York. Rockefeller wrote Masa, thanking him for the photo (Bonesteel 13).

That same year, Masa gave First Lady Grace Coolidge a large book of photos celebrating the proposed park. President Coolidge and his wife had visited the area on a number of occasions and, in 1922, had stayed at the Grove Park Inn. Later, during the Great Depression, Masa sent photographic collections to the governors of North Carolina and Tennessee. Historian Gil Leebrick maintains that, by sending his photographs to important government officials, Masa had an enormous impact on the creation of the park (Hart 253; Bonesteel 13–14, 19).

Masa also encouraged journalists and local authors to write promotional pieces about the Smokies. In a letter to his good friend Margaret Gooch, he writes:

Now I am planning many trips with you (not hiking) by automobile, so I can show you what scenery Western North Carolina really has I want you write as many [articles] as you can for magazines or newspapers. We need more publicity. Yes, I am great booster of this section. —George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 8/24/1930

Masa's devotion to the Smokies appears to have been, to some extent, part of his spirituality. Throughout his life, he carried with him a small collection of classic Japanese Samurai and Ninjutsu tales. The Ninja came from humble backgrounds and were devoted to living life in accordance with nature; they sought enlightenment through long mountain pilgrimages. Masa frequently said that he "came from nothing" and that his "church was in the mountains." Whatever the reason, Masa clearly loved the mountains. "Same old Smokies," he wrote to a National Park Service employee, "but each time we have different scenes . . . I never tired of it." (Bonesteel 16).¹¹

Masa and Kephart frequently visited Cataloochee, one of the oldest communities in the Smokies, on their travels. Masa favored the remote valley community as a base camp from which to launch photographic expeditions. Raymond Caldwell, a former Cataloochee resident, recalls Masa:

He was a little guy; he was energetic, had a lot of energy, and he stayed busy. He was a-takin' pictures and he was measuring trails with this little gadget he built hisself, and he needed a place to stay so he come to our house and my parents boarded him for several weeks. —Raymond Caldwell (Bonesteel 18)

And in the late fall of 1930, just weeks before the Asheville banks closed their doors, Masa escorted National Park officials through the Great Smokies:

National Park officials had great reception Monday night at Battery Park Hotel and next morning inspection trip started to Cataloochee then go up Balsam Mountains where we see Clingmans Dome to Mt. Guyot, entirely sweep of main divide, then drove to Bryson City. We went Cherokee Fair on

¹¹ Masa to Oliver Taylor, 7/6/1931.

Wednesday and Thursday made trip to Deep Creek. Then Friday we went up Andrew's Bald and Saturday visited Smokemont, come back to Asheville, our jaunt end.

When we were at Andrews Bald we saw wonderful colors painted by nature's brush. There is no words to express it. . . . We all just sit down, look and looked; it was wonderful. —George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 10/14/1930

When national park officials came here on November 6th, I made trip with them—exactly one week in the Great Smokies and following week I attacked by flu and sore throat. Spent one week in hospital and four weeks in bed. Then when I started work . . . banks closed their doors. I never saw such excited people in all my life. —George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 12/28/1930

I lost every cents I had in American National Bank, so that's that. But, believe me, always my head is up. Never surrender. —George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 3/2/1931

Asheville—in a period of massive expansion and over-inflated investments¹²—was hit hard by the Depression. Politicians and bank presidents were indicted and, as in larger cities, many investors committed suicide. Masa lost his savings and began asking all his friends—including Arno Cammerer—for money.¹³ But although Masa himself was adversely affected, he refused to renege on his commitment to the mountains. Soon, he was engaged in a new project: Mapping the southern portion of the Appalachian Trail (Bonesteel 19).

Under the leadership of Myron Avery, who oversaw the task of connecting existing trails and making new ones, Masa set to work in 1929, applying his knowledge of the terrain and his extensive maps and records to the task (Hart 261). Avery found his contribution to be invaluable:

I have never seen anything to equal your Smoky pictures. You are doing fine work. —Myron Avery to Masa, 11/26/1929

Your map duly arrived, and I have been examining it and am amazed to see how much you have been able to add to it . . . I am more indebted to you than I can say . . . Myron Avery to Masa, 2/6/1930

Masa's work on the AT and the park consumed most of his time and what little funds he had left. Uncomplaining, he somehow found time to print photos to give as gifts to his fellow Smoky Mountain enthusiasts, turning down their offers of payment. Despite Paul Fink's threat that he would "beat [Masa] up" if the latter did not enclose a bill with his photos, Masa refused to charge him (Bonesteel 20).

Now listen, I don't want you pay these Just drop me a line, that all. Money doesn't mean anything for this. —George Masa to Paul Fink, 9/2/1930

¹² Thomas Wolf describes the same piece of property in Asheville being sold three times in a day, each time going for a larger profit.

¹³ See George Masa to Arno Cammerer, 7/20/1931.

Indeed his willingness to give of himself, without any promise of financial reward and even in times of great personal hardship, was legendary. J. S. Holmes, state forester for North Carolina, wrote Masa in 1931:

Only the other day we were speaking of photographers and I referred to the enterprise, energy, and public spirit which you have always shown in your public work. Your great success in Western North Carolina is due, I consider in large part, to your willingness to take an endless amount of trouble without definite guarantees as to where the profit is coming from. I consider you are one of the finest assets western North Carolina has. — J. S. Holmes to George Masa, 5/7/1931

Masa was voted onto the board of the Appalachian Trail Conference. In early January 1931, he was the principal organizer, with Kephart's help, of the Carolina Appalachian Trail Club. From correspondence, it is clear that Masa was the main driving force behind getting the club off the ground:

You may heard that we finally organized hiking club called Carolina Appalachian Trail Club this month. I tell you it quite job for me getting together these bunches.

. . . I drew Constitution and by-laws from P.A.T. Club and I insisted Kep preside first meeting because his name quite draw attention to public, so believe it or not, there were about 50 people in first meeting, sure it surprised both of us, why we thought may come 10 or less . . .

Anyhow it will go, we elected young men and women as our officers and Mr. Mattoon, Mr. Rhoades, Mr. Kephart and I are councilors, so you see, we will have some club in near future. I will do my best bring our club to the front. —George Masa to Roy Ozmer, 1/26/1931 (Hart 262)

The club was responsible for clearing and marking the Appalachian Trail through the state. Paul Bonesteel describes the group as “small but hardy;” 23 members launched the club's second hike in the midst of heavy snowfall (Hart 262; Bonesteel 20).

Start hike in Snowstorm! Craziest people I ever saw. Sure enough hikers all right; I should say they are. —George Masa to Horace Kephart, 3/8/1931¹⁴

During its first year, the club scouted, measured, and marked 29.2 miles of the Appalachian Trail from Devil's Gap on the Tennessee border to Hot Springs, NC; 31.6 miles from Hot Springs to Waterville; and 43.5 miles from Nantahala Station to Rich Knob on the Georgia border. Masa himself provided most of the data on possible routes (Hart 262–263).

Throughout this time period, Masa was in regular contact with Horace M. Albright, director of the National Park Service, and Arno B. Cammerer, associate director. He sent them photographs and clippings from Asheville newspapers and, when Albright visited the city in 1931 and again in 1932, Masa served as his guide. Albright wrote:

14 Quoted in Horace Kephart to Paul Fink, 3/13/1931.

I cannot tell you how much I appreciated your letter of February 9, and the collection of pictures that you sent me. I am having them put in a scrapbook where I can easily refer to them. They will serve to remind me for many years to come of the fine visit I had on the North Carolina side of the Smokies with my friends from down there, including your own good self.

. . . With warmest regards, and again thanking you for your kindness, I am Sincerely yours,
Horace M. Albright, Director —Horace Albright to George Masa, 2/13/1931

I look back with keenest pleasure on my visit to Asheville last week, a visit that was made exceptionally pleasant on account of your many courtesies. —Horace Albright to George Masa, 2/9/1932 (Hart 260)

On April 20, Arno Cammerer expressed the appreciation both he and Director Albright felt for Masa's efforts:

Dear George,

Mr. Albright and I enjoyed your letter of April 9 so much.

You surely are the Great Smoky Mountains patriot, and we get more clippings of helpfulness from you than from any other local source. For this we are grateful to you

With kindest personal regards and best wishes, Cam —Arno Cammerer to George Masa, 4/20/1932

Later in 1932 Masa wrote to acting NPS director A. E. Demaray about establishing a business in the newly-created national park. He requested a lease to create a campsite at Smokemont, including a "Tea Room, Souvenir Stand, etc."—an enterprise that apparently he and Kephart had been planning since 1929.¹⁵

You may wonder that Mr. Kephart was in it, well one night while we encamped on Enloe Creek near State Line, set to camp fire and talking, I brought up this matter. "Say Kep. You know we can't hop around Smokies as we are now, sooner or later we have to get old, we ought to prepare some way to this problem, why we can lease some ground from Park Service after they take over these lands, establish some unusual camp for visitors. He said, "Sure, why not" so we started. But he gone forever, still I am go ahead as we planned. —George Masa to Arthur Demaray, 8/1/1932 (Hart 268)

Demaray's response was noncommittal: "We have not yet worked out any policy in connection with the establishment of tourist facilities" (Hart 268).¹⁶

There is little question, given the miles he logged, that Arno Cammerer was correct in his assessment of Masa as the best mountaineer in the Carolina Smokies. He was the first person to systematically measure many of the trails and possessed an intimate knowledge of the

¹⁵ According to Jim Casada, Masa and Kephart were planning another—perhaps an additional—business running car and bus tours through the park. Masa had brochures printed.

¹⁶ Demaray to Masa, 8/4/1932.

mountains, arguably a more comprehensive understanding than any other person of his time. When asked, he was able to give without hesitation correct information as to altitude, distance, location, topography, and other characteristics of practically every location in the Smokies (Hart 249, 258; *Asheville Citizen* 6/22/1933).

Kephart's Death

On April 3, 1931, Masa read in Asheville's morning paper of the death of his closest friend, Horace Kephart. In a letter to their common friend, Margaret Gooch, Masa wrote:

I don't know what I say about the death of our Kephart. It shocked me to pieces. This morning I have read paper, in headline, "Horace Kephart Killed." I couldn't believe it. —George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 4/3/1931

That morning, Masa found another surprise in his mailbox:

There a letter from Kep. I believe the letter, which I received this morning, is the last letter Kep ever wrote. It was concerning nomenclature of Great Smoky

God knows, but I don't, fate of life. Such sudden. He wrote me: "Am feeling fine alright and hope to see you here this coming weekend." Yes, I saw him today, but he couldn't see me. —George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 4/3/1931

According to George Kephart, Horace's grandson, Masa was one of the first to arrive at the funeral and the last to leave. He describes Masa as being "among the most stricken" of the mourners; ". . . he talked a lot with my father and my grandmother . . . about his time with Horace Kephart" (Bonesteel 21).

The feeling of admiration was certainly returned by Kephart. Two weeks before his death, Kephart wrote a letter to Paul Fink, expressing his admiration for Masa:

George and I put in a lot of work on the nomenclature of our side of the Park area—George especially; for while I only interviewed old residents throughout the territory and studied old records and selected Indian names, he, the persevering little divvle, labored long and earnestly on his maps. It is astonishing that a Jap (not even naturalized, so far as I know) should have done all this exploring and photographing and mapping, on his own hook, without compensation but at much expense to himself, out of sheer loyalty to the park idea and a fine sense of scenic values. He deserves a monument. —Horace Kephart to Paul Fink, 3/13/1931

Masa wrote also to Fink, two weeks after Kephart's death:

Kep is gone forever! His death shocked me to pieces. I never experienced such feeling in my life But we must keep going on what we have in our hands, and I like to carry out what Kep wanted. —George Masa to Paul Fink, 4/19/1931

To others he wrote: “. . . we planned before his death to make several trips into the Smokies this summer” and “. . . indeed I miss him so much because he was my buddy” (Hart 265).¹⁷

Masa received many letters of sympathy in the days and weeks following the funeral, including condolences from Arno Cammerer:

Dear George:

When I learned of Horace Kephart's death yesterday for the first time, my thoughts immediately turned to you. You have been such congenial comrades and trail companions that I know just how much you will miss him on your trips into the woods. Personally, I feel that it was the kind of death that Kep would have wanted, swift and sudden, without any previous illness or misgivings.

With kindest personal regards and best wishes, Cam —Arno Cammerer to George Masa,
4/6/1931

Masa's fondest wish was to bury his friend Kep within the boundary of the national park they'd worked so hard to create. The gravesite he selected was to be, fittingly, atop the mountain that bore Kephart's name.

Personally, I like to bury Kep's body top of Mt. Kephart, but so-called close friends of Bryson City saying that Kep wanted [to be buried] among his old friends and Mrs. Kephart said if that was his desire, why move his body to the top of Mt. Kephart. . . . I know Kep's desire: he wanted [to be] alone by himself, but I couldn't say against them. I like to know HOW MUCH close friends he had in Bryson more closer than I was? I admit that I associated with him a few years, but these few years up to his death, Kep picked me up as congenial comrades.¹⁸ —George Masa to Margaret Gooch,
4/20/1931

Masa later told Mrs. Gooch that, every time he visited Kep's grave, “I feel that I better carry him up to top of Mt. Kephart.”¹⁹ He also hoped to create a library dedicated to Kephart:

I strongly recommended that Kep's library should be established in Park Area and I am going to write Mr. Albright, director, and Mr. Cammerer, Associate Director of National Park Service, if they can help my plan, they are good friends of Kep and mine. —George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 4/20/1931

Indeed, Masa had had enough of Kephart's “good friends,” as they called themselves, by the fall of 1931:

Did you notice the story about Kephart Memorial Library Association? Sure they are best friends of Kep—telling the world how much he owe, so far so on; they just want their names appear on PAPER,

¹⁷ Letters to Anne D. Bryson, 6/27/1931, and Luke E. Tate, 7/14/1931.

¹⁸ All emphases are in original Masa letters.

¹⁹ George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 6/18/1931.

that's all they care. . . . Well, I know that "Hells bells! Cut that out; nobody's business but me," what Kep will say.

If I can secure the amount what I can pay Kep's debts, . . . including funeral expenses, I pay out all of them and tell them: So called GOOD FRIEND—JUMP IN LAKE. —George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 10/20/1931

As the months dragged on, Masa's financial troubles mounted and he began approaching clients and associates for loans to keep his business afloat. He was unsuccessful in his fundraising efforts and still heartsick at the loss of his friend (Bonesteel 22).

Am quite busy attending so many things beside my own business. I am making new map of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Nomenclature and also Appalachian Trail . . . and look after Carolina Appalachian Trail Club. . . . Our hiking club going very fine and when I was on trail, I always cry in my heart "wish Kep with me" and see how many hikers going on each hike. —George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 10/20/1931

Despite his own sadness, Masa was known for keeping spirits up among fellow hikers—and for setting and maintaining the hiking pace. His catch phrases became something akin to mantras in the group, including "More walk, less talk" and "Off your seats and on your feet!" (Bonesteel 23).

Local people thinks I . . . have plenty of money because my customers all rich people or social persons. . . . I worked like hell, studied like hell and got good reputation at present, and I never told anyone business is rotten. Whenever they asked, I say "Business fine," and I smile through, so you see people don't know. —George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 6/18/1931

In the midst of his financial woes and sadness at the loss of his good friend, Masa always knew what to do to bring his spirits back up:

I just leave office and go into woods, get fresh balsam air, then come back [and] start strong, good fight. No use to worry, that's way I do; [maybe] I am wrong, but it good to me all time. — George Masa to Margaret Gooch, 9/1931

Masa's Death

On April 2, 1933, Masa organized a hike to memorialize the second anniversary of Horace Kephart's death. Over 100 people climbed to the top of Mt. Kephart that day, including Paul Fink, Jim Thompson, and Harvey Broome. It would be one of Masa's last hikes. Soon after, he was struck down by an illness described by some as tuberculosis and others as "Old Man Flu." Bonesteel speculates that Masa, like many early photographers, in fact suffered from a respiratory system weakened by prolonged exposure to dark room chemicals (Hart 265; Bonesteel 24).

Broke and incapacitated, Masa's condition rapidly worsened. His friends checked him into the county sanitarium, described by one journalist as a "drab and colorless charity hospital,"²⁰ where many TB patients were treated. When Margaret Gooch visited Masa, she was alarmed:

On the 13th I went up to see George and found him so critically ill that it was almost impossible for him to talk with me. I stayed two days, hoping against hope that he would improve . . . I did not dream that conditions were so bad with him. —Margaret Gooch to Blake Creasman, 6/23/1933

At noon on June 21, 1933, Masa died in the county sanitarium. His obituary listed the cause of death as "influenza and other causes." George Ellison suggests that the "other causes" were, principally, the death of his friend, Horace Kephart (Hart 249, 269; Bonesteel 25).

Masa died penniless and in debt. Members of the Carolina Mountain Club and other friends pitched in to pay for his funeral.²¹ Although Masa wished to be buried next to Kephart in Bryson City, limited moneys made it impossible and, on June 23, he was buried in the shadow of a large white pine in Asheville's Riverside cemetery. More than 100 friends attended the funeral and newspapers speculated that his final resting place might ultimately be in the Smokies. His grave remained unmarked until 1947—14 years after his death—when the club placed there a 1 x 2 ft. stone bearing his name and dates (Bonesteel 25; Hart 250, 269; *Asheville Citizen* 6/22/1933, 6/24/1933).

On June 15, 1934, just a week shy of the first anniversary of Masa's death, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was formally designated. Masa had surely believed that the park was a foregone conclusion. Indeed, in the year preceding his death, he'd received a letter from Arno Cammerer, saying:

I think things will work out all right in time, no matter what is done. The whole project is too far along to end in anything but ultimate success. In my opinion, you are the best mountaineer on the North Carolina side . . . —Arno Cammerer to George Masa, 2/16/1933

In 1958, Carolina Mountain Club members pushed for a lasting monument to Masa's contribution to the park and, under the leadership of Dr. Samuel Robinson, began a concerted effort to have a mountain named for him. On April 25, 1961, a 5600-foot wooded peak that sits on the shoulders of Mt. Kephart, not far from Charlie's Bunion, was officially given the name Masa Knob (Bonesteel 28; *Asheville Citizen* 5/25/1961).

Masa's Photographic Legacy

Upon his death, Masa's friends made an inventory of his estate. Although he owned little in the way of property or personal effects, his photographic collection was extensive, including

²⁰ Caine 1939.

²¹ The U.S. State Department acknowledged the gift of Masa's funeral as a "friendly act to the Japanese nation," an odd sentiment given that Masa had cut himself off from Japan entirely for at least 18 years (Bonesteel 26).

thousands of prints and negatives, hand-cataloged by Masa using his own precise system. In 1934, Arthur Stupka, a naturalist with the GSMNP, reviewed the collection of more than 6000 prints, judging 400 of those related to the park to be “exceptionally fine.” He ordered 75 to be made into slides and preserved by the park. Whether or not this was ever done is unknown. If they were, they have since disappeared from the park archives (Bonesteel 27).

In fact, much of Masa’s photographs—save those preserved through the sale of his business, Plateau Studios, or those he’d printed for publications, clients, and friends—have disappeared or been unjustly appropriated by others. The year before his death, for instance, Masa had co-produced the first comprehensive guide to the Smokies. Authored by Masa and his friend George McCoy, an Asheville newspaper editor, the book, featuring Masa’s favorite trails and illustrated by his photos, was finally published a few months after his death. When it was reprinted two years later, Masa’s name had been dropped from the byline, even though none of the content had changed (Bonesteel 26; Hart 269).

After Masa’s estate had finally been settled, Elliott Lyman Fisher, a photographer who came to Asheville the year after Masa’s death, purchased thousands of his negatives. Fisher reprinted Masa’s works for years, at first acknowledging the source, but later selling Masa’s images under his own name. Fisher retired to Florida and in 1968, after a long illness, took his own life. Not one of the thousands of Masa images purchased by Fisher has ever been found. Poor quality reproductions in Paul Bonesteel’s film, taken from early park publications, give a sense of the treasures that have been lost (Bonesteel 27).

* * * * *

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