

DA teacher, former *Bulletin* photographer, produces fine photo book

BY MARIE MCCANDLESS
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Rick McWherter has fond memories of walking the Derry Chestnut Ridge with his grandfather.

Those boyhood hikes have inspired McWherter to produce his first hardcover book with a collection of his fine art photography, titled *The Walkwood Album*.

McWherter began his career as a visual artist as a photo-journalist from July 1975 to November 1976 at the *Latrobe Bulletin*, and a photo illustrator for advertising, both while still in

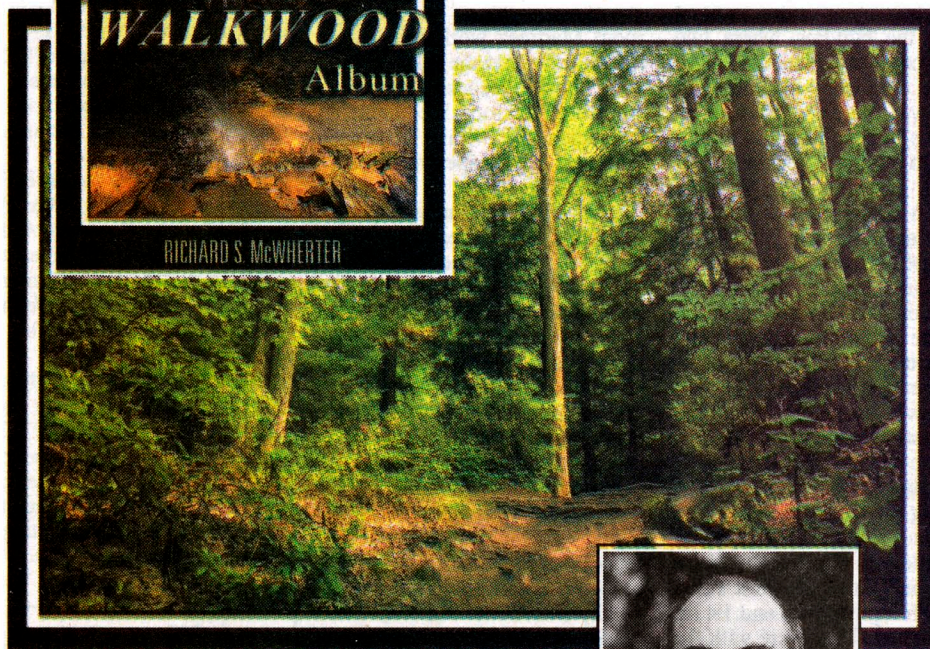
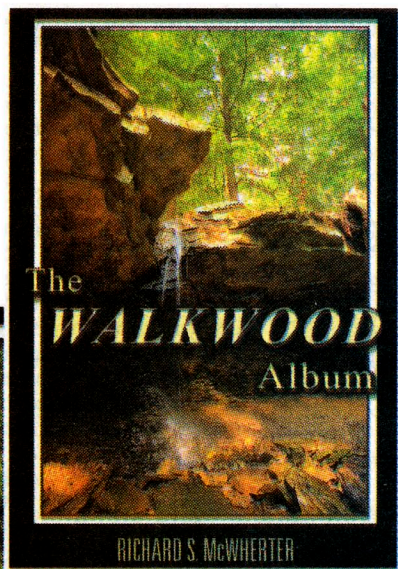
high school. His work has been seen in many local publications and art exhibitions, and also has been reproduced in national magazines for fine art photography. Later, he earned his bachelor of fine arts degree from Seton Hill University and in 1996 he began teaching visual arts at the high school in his hometown in Derry, where he now serves as the art department chair.

The name Walkwood is a shortening a "walk in the woods." It is published by McWherter's entrepreneurial venture, Walkwood Publishing.

The 38-page book contains 16 full-color photographs, many made in the Laurel Highlands and the Chestnut Ridge.

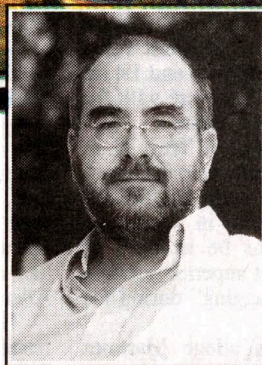
"This theme began as a remembrance of the many hours that my grandfather and I would spend hiking on his wooded property in the Chestnut Ridge area near his home here in Pennsylvania," said McWherter. His grandfather owned the land with a vision of seeing it developed as a place where people would build homes and prosper.

"I would often spend time with him in what
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PHOTOS BY RICK MCWHERTER

This image of Linn Run Trail, Rector, is among those included in Rick McWherter's new book, *The Walkwood Album*. The top photo shows the cover of his new book.



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we all called 'the ridge,' as he surveyed and calculated the layout of his plan," McWherter explained. "However, in retrospect, it sort of had the reverse effect on me as I watched this wooded playground of my youth change over the years. Over time, the places where I caught tadpoles and crayfish, followed deer trails, drank from clear mountain springs and dreamed of adventure, were eventually paved and landscaped with people's homes and driveways," he said.

Although there are many photographs in this book that are from places along "the ridge," McWherter didn't begin to work professionally on this theme until many of those childhood spots were gone.

"Because of that, my efforts in this work was not to document a place, but rather a feeling that one might get on any day, on any given walk in the woods," said McWherter.

"I worked on the design, layouts and prints for the Walkwood book for about three months or so, off and on," McWherter explained, "with most of the time spent deciding which pictures to include and which to leave out. Many of the photos are from the last five years or so, but some go back much earlier."

The biggest stumbling block, he said, "has been waiting for technology to catch up with the ideas racing in my head. Back when I started working on the Sheltered Passions theme many years ago, I was shopping that idea around as a book back then and I had a very famous art book publisher from New York City write me a personal letter to tell me he loved the photographs and the idea for the book. However, he said he couldn't publish it because I was not famous enough for the book to sell enough to make any money!

"With that lesson learned, I knew I wanted to be my own publisher and have control not only over the images, but the book itself. But back then, self publishing a high-quality art book was just too expensive. However, with recent technologies like those used at companies like blurb.com, it has become much more feasible economically.

"It's similar to how computers have allowed writers and musicians to create and publish, and it is now working that way for pho-

tographers and artists as well. In fact, I'm exploring the possibility of offering workshops to teach others how to make and publish their own books.

"With famous writers like Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau starting out with self-published books, as well as many others since then, it doesn't seem like such a crazy idea any more."

The Walkwood Album images are created using high-end professional camera equipment and state-of-the-art digital tools to meet McWherter's original vision for the work. Each image also is available as a fine art gallery print that he creates himself, using the archival giclee printing process, for high image quality and stability.

But these are not just pretty calendar pictures, McWherter is quick to note. If that is all you see, he would challenge you to look closer. There is beauty here, but not without flaws. According to McWherter's artist's statement in the book, nature is grand, but there are always signs of the decay that signals the continuing cycle of endings and rebirth.

McWherter also acknowledges the influence of other artists in his work, including the Hudson River artists, painter Asher B. Durand and the romantics, and Caspar David Friedrich. Also, the artwork and writings of Ansel Adams has influenced a generation of artists, including McWherter, and established the profession of the fine art photographer.

Young artists often are told to write or illustrate what they know best. He said he didn't grow up in a New World wilderness, an untamed frontier or a national park. He was born and raised in the post-industrial Rust Belt of America, with telephone poles, abandoned vehicles and empty factories blocking his camera's viewfinder. "I believed, however, that if I couldn't find beauty here, in the place of my birth, then I would be forever lost in my journey as an artist," McWherter explained.

McWherter has received many awards for his photographic art, as well as for innovative ideas in teaching. McWherter continues to work on photographic portfolios and art projects in this area, where he lives with his wife Kimberly, who also has won many awards as a science teacher at Derry Area

High School.

His mid-course career correction to education was a call toward a more noble profession than selling consumer products in commercial advertising, McWherter explained. "As a young adult, the thought of working in advertising was very exciting, and of course industry and commerce are vital to our economy. But before a child can learn to read or do math, they need to know that squiggles on paper are ideas. Simply put, art is what makes all learning possible. So naturally, teaching art is very important to me. In fact, it not only connects all subject areas, but all cultures as well," he said.

McWherter is just as passionate about his own artwork of the area. "These are places that I've grown up in, of course, but these are also places I like to be. I can remember as a child being stuck inside at my grandparent's house while it was raining outside and taking the time to look at a painting that hung in their home. It was a reproduction of a wilderness landscape and I thought, 'I wish I was there right now,'" he said.

"That's really what many of these photographs are about; when I'm stuck in a bad mindset or physical circumstances that are unpleasant, these are places in my memory that I would like to be in instead. These are my efforts to capture those moments that feel just right," he added.

McWherter said his book has been well-received so far — "I've even sold a few copies to family members, which is very unusual for an artist."

And he is working on designing another hardcover book.

"I've been invited to have an exhibit at Seton Hill University next fall and I'm planning on having a book ready for that show," he related. "It's a series of black-and-white photographs of American rituals, called *Sheltered Passions*, that I've been working on for about 10 years. There are sample images on my Web site also."

(The Walkwood Album, by Richard S. McWherter, published by Walkwood Publishing, 7x7 inches (18x18 cm), 38 pages, 16 full-color photographs, hardcover \$34.95, softcover \$19.95, is available online from www.walkwood.net and www.blurb.com.)