



Adams Falls
Linn Run State Park - Rector, PA
Photo by Richard S. McWherter

LAUREL MOUNTAIN POST

The Walkwood Album

Boyhood Hikes with Grandfather in Chestnut Ridge Inspire Life's Work

Local artist Richard S. McWherter has just released his first hardcover book with a collection of his fine art photography, titled *The Walkwood Album*. With the name Walkwood being a shortening of the phrase a "walk in the woods," the book was produced by McWherter's entrepreneurial venture, Walkwood Publishing. With 38 pages and sixteen full-color photographs, the book is now available on-line through the distributing website, www.blurb.com, as well as the artist's own website at www.walkwood.net. The book features outstanding examples of contemporary fine art photography that he has created over the years, with many of the images made here in Western Pennsylvania's Laurel Highlands and Chestnut Ridge areas. But what has become a major milestone for the artist began as a simple idea from a young boy's childhood memory.

"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 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," lamented McWherter.

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.

The images are from a portfolio of work that he has created using high-end professional camera equipment and state of the art digital tools to meet his original vision for the work. Each image is also available as a fine art gallery print that he creates himself, using the archival giclee printing process, for the highest degree in image quality and stability.

But these are not just pretty calendar pictures. If that is all you see, then McWherter would challenge you to look closer. They are not picture-perfect postcards. There is beauty here of course, but not without flaws. According to McWherter's artist's statement that introduces the images 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 artist's in his work, including the Hudson River artists, painter Asher B. Durand and the romantics, and Caspar David Friedrich to name a few. But of course, much can be made for the case of how the artwork and writings of Ansel Adams has influenced a generation of artists, including McWherter, and established the profession of the fine art photographer.

"Certainly, there is an attempt here to capture the majesty that nature surrounds us with. However, as a creative artist, it is not my attempt to sequel a landscape movement. Likewise, trying to illustrate grand vistas of primal America untouched by mankind would make such an effort seem folly, or at least dishonest," writes McWherter.

Young artists are often told to write or illustrate what they know best, so he took this

advice to heart. 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," he explained.

McWherter has worked in many different jobs in his career as a visual artist, starting as a photo-journalist, 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 has also been reproduced in national magazines for fine art photography. Later in his career, 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, Pennsylvania, where he now serves as the Art Department Chair.

He has received many awards for his photographic art, as well as for his innovative ideas in teaching, all of which has earned him recognition from many regional, state, national and international organizations. McWherter continues to work on this and many other photographic portfolios and art projects here in Western Pa, where he lives with his wife Kimberly, who has also won many awards as a science teacher at Derry Area High School.

However, he describes his mid-course career correction to education as a call towards a more noble profession than selling consumer products in commercial advertising. "As a young adult, the thought of working in advertising was very exciting, and of course industry and commerce are vital to our economy," said McWherter. "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 explained.

When describing his efforts in photographing the beauty of Western Pennsylvania and specifically the Laurel Highlands, McWherter is just as passionate about his own artwork. "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,'" McWherter 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. And from looking at these images first hand, these are certainly pictures that "feel just right."

(*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, available on-line from www.walkwood.net and www.blurb.com.)

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