



Balance \$103,225

*The Rocky Fork with the evening sun on God's Country, just downstream of Rocky Fork Lake State Park.*

## Reuniting God's Country I with God's Country II

Ten years ago the Arc of Appalachia acquired God's Country I from one of the region's most singular and unforgettable individuals, Emerson Babington. Emerson always loved this corner of Highland County and during his long life he had amassed quite a collection of land holdings in the Rocky Fork Lake region. His bond to the land was tight. Occasionally he would sell off small parcels to young families just starting out - people for whom he had a soft spot in his heart - but for the most part he refused to part with his land.

Emerson developed two major campgrounds in the Rocky Fork watershed. One of them was called Babington's Campground, located near the Rocky Fork Lake, and one was on the Rocky Fork proper, which he named God's Country. Both campgrounds offered RV sites to the public on a yearly rental basis.

Emerson, a devoutly religious man, has long been known for his charitable good will, his fiery disposition, and his refreshing forthrightness. His most valued possession is his Bible, although he has admittedly been known to brandish a gun on those occasions that warranted it. Conversations with Emerson, for those lucky enough to know him, are remembered as lively and engaging. Topics usually centered around past escapades, which were legendary; selected readings from the Bible, and animated discussions

on numerology. Emerson found deep meaning in numbers wherever they existed, such as the dates of important happenings, the verse numbers of biblical readings, and even the birth date and addresses of new acquaintances.

By 2006 Emerson's health was failing and his medical bills rising. Driven by necessity, Emerson reluctantly offered to sell his favorite property to the Arc, God's Country. But only part of it, which is how God's Country came to be split in half. The Arc gained the upper stretch of the creek, all the way to the Rocky Fork Dam, and Emerson kept the lower half mile of the creek, along with the campground.

A few years after the God's Country split, Emerson sold us Maude's Cedar Narrows, land that lay immediately across the Rocky Fork from God's Country. The tract was named after Maude Lang, a now deceased local school teacher. Many decades ago Maude had generously self-financed the farm for Emerson. He remained grateful and he wanted her name to be carried forward with the land. Emerson's sales of land to the Arc have been important components in the creation of what we now call Sanctuary West - those properties centering around OH-753.

Following these sales, Emerson's health continued to decline. Because he was no longer able to personally oversee his campgrounds, these businesses understandably suffered. Last winter we were contacted by Emerson's daughter



*Photo Top: Heron at rookery on Paint Creek, located near the Sanctuary and off of Falls Road. Photo by Kathryn Cubert. Wildlife is unusually dense along the less visited upper reaches of the Rocky Fork in God's Country. Pictured here are (clockwise): bald eagle, river otter, and black ducks from the North Country that winter over in these quiet backwaters*

and guardian with the offer to sell to us one or both of Emerson's campgrounds. We were eager to re-unite God's Country; but our inability to finance the project quickly, and our disinterest in buying Babington's Campground, a highly developed operation, gave the daughter pause for thought. When a real estate investor from Columbus offered to buy both of Emerson's campgrounds in one packaged deal, it was an offer she couldn't refuse.

That should have been the end of the story, but if you have been around the Arc long enough, you probably know by now that a challenging chapter is not necessarily the last chapter. We contacted the new owner and asked if he might be possibly interested in selling us just the God's Country II tract. We also asked if he would be willing to wait until the next Clean Ohio grant cycle so we might seek funding from that source. To our good fortune, his answers to both questions were yes. Thus we signed a purchase

offer contract and applied for Clean Ohio funding.

When we negotiated the boundaries for the God's Country split with Emerson back in 2007, the only road frontage he was willing to let go was a narrow strip of land off OH-753 at the minimum width permitted by the county. Although this corridor gave us legal access to God's Country I on paper, in reality it required traversing several steep ravines and two swamps. These features prevented us from accessing God's Country I's meadows with our land management equipment, and it stopped us from developing a hiking trail. The public was unable to get in, and for management purposes, neither could we!

Because God's Country I was so landlocked, it fell out of the consciousness of most of our supporters, but never our staff. We could still get in by foot, and we got to know God's Country I over the years as the wildlife paradise it is. Perhaps it is because of its remote setting, or because it



*The Arc's 2019 autumn AmeriCorps NCCC crew (one member short) proudly survey the completion of their cleverly engineered bridge—constructed solely with natural stone leveraged from the site and anchored together with hydraulic cement. The new bridge lies on the God's Country I tract and will one day be part of a new Sanctuary hiking trail that God's Country II's acquisition will make possible.*

possesses the perfect proportion of creek bank, fields, and woodlands; but whatever the reason, the tract of God's Country I abounds in wild turkey, bluebirds, kingfishers, great blue herons and some of the densest populations of Henslow's sparrows in all the Sanctuary. The creek is regularly visited by mink, beaver and even river otter.

In the winter, large flocks of ducks take refuge in the waters kept free of ice by the volume of water coming out of the dam. Rafts of black ducks are signature residents all winter long. Migratory flocks commonly include redheads, buffleheads, teal, wood duck, pie-billed grebes, mallards, hooded and common mergansers.

**We are delighted to now share with you two pieces of splendid news.**

One, the grant was successfully awarded. And two, if we succeed in raising the required 25% matching funds over this coming winter, we will be able to close on the God's Country II sometime in 2020, along with its half-mile long frontage on the Rocky Fork, making it one of the most significant acquisitions in our quarter century of piecing the Rocky Fork corridor back together.

The two most exciting things about acquiring God's Country II will be getting access for our mowing equipment so that we can properly steward the fields, and being able to finally develop public hiking trails. We are so charged by the latter prospect that we have actually started developing

the trail on the God's Country I, even though we must wait for God's Country II to complete it. This is admittedly putting the cart before the horse, but we wanted to take advantage of the help offered by the AmeriCorps NCCC crew who are currently in residence at the Sanctuary.

As we write, the crew is hard at it. They are removing the ubiquitous autumn olive, benching in the new trail, taking down old fences, and building a creek crossing. Puzzling out the design of this bridge and constructing it was, for some of the crew members, the highlight of their entire year of work spent in three previous locations in the Midwest. So clever was their design (see photo above) that the casual hiker might mistake the bridge as a fortuitous but natural arrangement of stones.

For other crew members, a highlight has been the company they keep. Common sights at God's Country while they have been hard at work have been the ever watchful red tail hawks, the stately great blue herons that course the creek daily, the rarer sight of a pileated woodpecker that slices the sky with its straight arrow flight, and the mature bald eagles that survey their work, circling high above with the sunlight bouncing off their backs.

Such is the magic of God's Country, soon to be loved by the larger world. Emerson is very frail now and hasn't been on the land for years, but the seeds of love he sowed on the property certainly fell on fertile ground.