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American dreams

On countless trails, you'll find reminders of the struggles and sacrifices that helped to make our nation what it is today.

By Gene W. Wood, PhD

I ride out on the trail to be renewed—in my relationship with my horse and with the land. I am looking for harmony between my horse, this land that I love, and me.

My renewal only partly involves the aesthetics of the landscape. Anyone can appreciate the beauty of a wildflower or birds or a panoramic view along the trail. But it takes a greater depth of thought to recognize the cultural heritage scattered about the land, artifacts of human endeavor in a wild or recently wild setting.

When I ride through the Piedmont and the foothills of the Blue Ridge in the spring, I often see clumps of daffodils, sometimes a lilac, often wisteria, and other such lovely bloomers. These survivors of an earlier time conjure a vision of the wives of poor dirt farmers, who cultivated something lovely to

BYWAYS: Gene Wood, PhD, aboard his Tennessee Walking Horse Gus, pauses for a moment while mapping trails in South Carolina. Wood is a professor of forest wildlife ecology and an extension trails specialist at Clemson University.

look at in an otherwise hard and drab life. It's obvious to me that the poverty of worn-out cotton farms could not overwhelm the human need for beauty. And my horse and I move on.

On South Carolina's Coastal Plain, I ponder the abandoned rice fields and the ditches that supplied them with fresh water. Once a source of wealth to plantation owners, the rice exports from these fields were the product of 17th century European engineering and the efforts of Africans brought primarily from Sierra Leone because a rice culture flourished there. And my horse and I move on.

In the southern Blue Ridge, I ride through the hills that were once home to thousands of Cherokee. Occasionally I find a stone chip that served as a scraper or a knife or a projectile point exposed by the erosion of the trail. I think of those who made and used it; I wonder how and when they might have lost it. And my horse and I move on.

Here and there I find an old house foundation. If it has a lot of brick in it, I know that the builders were people of means. If the

foundation is made up of rough stone and coarse mortar, I know that the structure was the best that could be built using local materials that were packed on ground sledges and hauled to the work site with horse and mules. When I find broken pottery on these sites I wonder if someone treasured the piece. Did it have family significance? And my horse and I move on.

When I ride in Virginia's Blue Ridge, I travel trails created or improved by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. Young men working with crude tools, rough hands and strong backs created these mountain-side trails. Many of these trail builders went on to serve in World War II, some never to return for a chance to enjoy the fruits of their labors. And my horse and I move on.

Deep in the Virginia woods, I ride on the trails traveled by my ancestors, and know that I live a life they might have dreamed. My horse drinks from the streams that run through lands my family once owned, and as my camp goes to sleep there that night, I hear my grandmother's laughter in those gently rushing waters.

Soon I ride on, with a spiritual sense of this caravan of generations of people playing different roles in time and space. I am renewed in my search for who I am and what role I play on this stage—this land. What legacy will I pass on? 🐾

