

Fall Tales From
Tennessee Writers

3

Rowing
Upstream

8

Reviving the
Rugby Dreams

14

Parks for
The People

20

Art As a
Family Affair

26

Tennessee
Tidbits

32

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Fall Tales From Tennessee Writers

For these notable authors,
leaves, lore, and lyricism are all part of
our state's autumn wonders.

Clingmans Dome With Michael Lee West

"On the way to Clingmans Dome in the Smoky Mountains, you drive at a slant, climbing through the seasons, past sycamore leaves flying across the road like a flock of yellow birds, past great drifts of oaks, past treetops, the tips flaming red, curiously bare in places. As you drive, it's as if the seasons inside your head are changing too. Even in your sleep, you see colors drifting down: scarlet, tangerine, russet, wine.

"You keep rising, moving through the low, bruised clouds, into the purest blue. At the dome, the trees are one wash of green: cedars, pines, firs. But below, the sunlight seems almost clawed by the trees, falling in deep baskets of gold. You can feel winter building and smell it



coming like the coming of a storm.

"This slow, corkscrew climb, one I undertake at least once a year, is much more than fodder for my novels. It's almost a spiritual quest. When I stare down from the lookout, I'm reminded that we're here for such a short time, passing inexorably through

our own cycles: love and laughter, illness and health, sorrow and despair. Being in the mountains kind of washes you clean, like a baptism."

Michael Lee West from Lebanon, Tennessee, is the author of She Flew the Coop and Crazy Ladies. Her latest novel, American Pie, is out this month.

Shelby Foote's Mississippi River Reverie

"Fall is my favorite season, especially on up into November. The vegetation is beginning to die, but the

landscape is coming out clearer. It has a brooding quality to it that I like.

"The view of the Mississippi River any time of the year is a great view. I lived on the bluff for about four years. Where I lived, you could see the old bridge and, upstream, you saw the new bridge and the old city skyline stretching around to the right, and the presence of the Mississippi River itself.

"The Mississippi River is central to everything I think of in writing. I've lived on it all my life, down in the Delta and here in Memphis. The water is to me what the Atlantic Ocean is to somebody who lives on the East Coast or the Pacific to somebody who lives on the West Coast."

Novelist Shelby Foote is best



known for his massive three-volume Civil War: A Narrative. The Memphis author was among the commentators who brought that tragic war to life for many Americans in Ken Burns's PBS series entitled The Civil War.

**The French Broad River,
Wilma Dykeman**

"The French Broad is my river, especially in autumn. Born in the high mountains of Western North Carolina, it crosses into Eastern Tennessee, gathering streams and other rivers to join the Holston River at Knoxville and become the mighty Tennessee.

"The Cherokee called it 'Long Man the River' and said the streams that feed it were its 'Chattering Children.' I think of those images as I walk the trails.





"Along the way, the trees unfold their magic by stages, from the first red blush of sourwood in late summer, to the October gold of poplar and hickory and the maples' scarlet, and finally the dark red oak leaves that come late and cling until winter returns them to the earth.

"Sometimes an abandoned mountain cabin, an apple tree turned wild, or a lonely little cemetery reminds me of the people who have made history in these hills—and beyond. Then I know that no matter how far or long I've

traveled, when I hear and taste and smell the waters of the French Broad River, I can go home again."

The French Broad, *was the first of Wilma Dykeman's 17 books of fiction, history, biography, and social commentary. Her three novels, The Tall Woman, The Far Family, and, Return the Innocent Earth, available in paperback, are all set in the French Broad country, where she lives. Among her many awards are a Guggenheim Fellowship, Distinguished Southern Writers Award, and Tennessee Conservation Writer of the Year.*

John Egerton's Favorite Fall Drive And Dinner

"One thing that I enjoy doing just about any season is making the circuit that goes Southeast from Nashville toward Lynchburg. That section of Tennessee is hill country, not mountains. It's wonderful, rolling hills and valleys. You see all the oaks and the maples and the poplars and the sweet gums, brilliant foliage of every hue.

I recognize these places, and there is a comforting, welcoming

sort of homecoming feeling about them that serves my soul well.

"There is a boarding house down there [in Lynchburg] called Miss Mary Bobo's. They have a big garden and most of what you eat there, particularly in the summer and early fall, is right out of their garden. It has the dining rooms of a boarding house, just as it did over 100 years ago, when Miss Mary Bobo ran it. It's a mid-day meal, what we used to call 'dinner' in the South, but what everybody now calls 'lunch.' You sit down at a table with about a dozen people and they bring the food in big bowls and somebody says grace."

John Egerton lives in Nashville and has written numerous books, including Speak Now Against the Day, The Americanization of Dixie, Generations, and Southern Food.

John Netherton's Big South Fork

"Fall is my favorite time of year in just about any place in Tennessee. That's when the Big South Fork is magnificent. In the autumn, the colors are more vibrant, the air is clearer, and you've got the cold snap to the air. In the coolness of the morning, you usually have fog lying down around the river.

I got to explore a lot of the gorges and go down into areas where, except for an occasional moonshiner, prehistoric people were really the last people there. It's an area where you can even look down on vultures soaring.



Christina Baker Kline's Thoughts on Lookout Mountain

"I remember my uncle taking me, as a child, to the top of Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga and explaining the history of the mountain, how the soldiers had been arrayed in battle during the Civil War. It was the first time I had stood on a place where people had fought, and I remember being struck by the awesome power of history.

"I've lived in the South and I've lived in the North. In Maine, the colors of fall are bright and vivid, because it gets cold so fast. But in Tennessee, there is this muted quality, almost like watercolors. To me, the beauty of the subtle landscape is a metaphor for the quality of life I recognize there.

"When I think about the muted colors of the fall landscape, looking out at Chattanooga up on the ridge and seeing all the colors that blend together, I think of how my Tennessee relatives finish each other's stories and share the same kind of humor. They have a quality of family and togetherness that's rooted in the earth."

Christina Baker Kline, who spent some early years in Tennessee, now lives in New York City. She wrote the novel Sweet Water and The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk About Living Feminism, co-written with her mother, Christina L. Baker. Upcoming are Child of Mine: New Mothers Talk About the First Year (April 1997), and a second novel, Desire Lines. ◇

"John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club, actually passed through the Big South Fork area. [Muir wrote,] 'Every tree, every flower, every ripple and eddy of this lovely stream seemed solemnly to fill the presence of the Great Creator.' To me, it's always very spiritual when I go out there."

Nashville native John Netherton has photographed nature professionally for more than 25 years, studying with such notables as Ansel Adams. He has written or co-written and photographed 11 books, among them Big South Fork Country, Tennessee Wonders, Tennessee: A Homecoming, and his recent Tennessee: A Bicentennial Celebration.