

# JIM CASADA OUTDOORS

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## May 2016 Newsletter

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### May's Enduring Magic

May possibly ranks as my favorite month of the year, although October would certainly give it a run for the money. It's a time of early harvest, of the garden beginning to show real promise, of bedding bream and rising trout, and of spring in all its lushness. In my part of the world the threat of frost is gone, but nights remain comfortable or even a tad chilly, while daytime has none of the withering heat and humidity to be faced in coming months.

May is also a month that sets my already strong bent for nostalgia into overdrive as I look back on all the month meant to me as a boy. Here are some of those warm memories, and I'm betting that most of you will share some of them along with calling to mind a whole bunch of others of your own.

- **Barefootin' it.** By month's end, if I played my cards just right and the weather cooperated, Momma would let me shed my shoes for an hour or two in the late afternoon after school. How wonderful it was to feel the cool grass beneath my feet, to walk through a mud hole squishing water and mud between my toes, or to wander through newly plowed ground feeling and smelling the good earth.
- **School getting out.** Unless we had had a lot of "snow days" that state law required to be made up, school normally ended the last week in May. The heady thought of three months of freedom, of entire days of leisure (I conveniently ignored chores such as weeding and hoeing the garden,

### Jim's Doings

Some aspects of my monthly activities follow a predictable pattern, and since I don't think I've ever shared them I thought it appropriate to do so. Each Monday, if I haven't already done so, I complete and I send in my weekly column for the *Smoky Mountain Times*, the little newspaper serving the place I grew up, Bryson City, the county seat of Swain County tucked squarely away in North Carolina's Great Smokies. The title of the column is "Mountain Musings and Memories," and that's exactly the nature of the material. The good folks at the newspaper let me range fairly widely and have done so for somewhere around 600-700 consecutive columns. I might look back with fondness on a youthful fishing trip, share memories of some special person or event from days gone by, or delve into history. For example, right now I'm writing a five-part series on the Great Depression in Swain County.

It hit the region terribly hard, being even more devastating than the undeniably terrible economic suffering felt across the nation. That's because of multiple factors making matters worse, most notably coinciding exactly with the demise of the American chestnut and takings by eminent domain of the farms and homes of hundreds of hardy mountain folks. Almost certainly many of them put the money they received with the seizure of their land, piddling though it was, in a local bank that failed. It's such a sad, solemn story I'll be compelled to take a brighter note when the series is over.

Then every other week I craft a column for the local daily newspaper where I now live, the *Rock Hill Herald*. I've written for them for upwards of three decades, and I guess there's a commentary on the state of daily newspapers in our world when I note two things. First, I'm pretty certain my byline began appearing in the newspaper prior to the employment of any of their current staff, and I'm even more certain I could walk through the

mowing the lawn, and as I moved into my teens, summer jobs of one type or another), and of fishing to my heart's content was more than enough to carry me through end of the semester exams and other bothersome realities.

- **Catching and selling night crawlers.** Warm spring showers bring thoughts of procreation to the worm world, and when that happens those giants of the underground, night crawlers, do exactly what their name suggests—they crawl at night. A fellow with a flashlight, a big bucket with some moss in it, and a quick hand could catch what for a boy was a minor fortune in an evening's work. Night crawlers brought a penny apiece, and earning three or four dollars for a couple of hours "work" was big money in the 1950s. It wasn't really work at all but rather a nocturnal delight. Mind you, I'm sure that much stooping, bending, and grabbing would bring a quite different perspective from me today (and overall soreness on the morrow).
- **Catching and selling spring lizards.** Another way of picking up some money was catching spring lizards (that's what we called them, though they were actually salamanders) to sell to bait stores. Good ones fetched three cents apiece and the red speckled ones brought a nickel. Much like dealing with night crawlers, this involved quick hands and scrambling in seep branches and springs while turning over rocks. I now know that it's easier to catch them at night (their eyes light up under a flashlight's beam), but in today's world there are severe limitations on what types are legal.
- **Camping trips in the back country.** The first weekend in May brought the opening of trout season in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and I don't think I missed an opener from the time I was 11 or 12 years of age until I went off to college. Most of the backpacking trips were to the headwaters of my "home" stream, Deep Creek, at a place known as Poke Patch. I remember bitterly cold wading; one outing when temperatures dropped so low there was a skim of ice in the water bucket; and feasts of fried trout, ramps, and branch lettuce. I didn't own a sleeping bag and a single Army blanket was my bedding. Obviously I was far hardier as a boy than is true today.

doors and not a soul on the premises would know me. Newspapers have changed, and dramatically so.

I've been connected with [Sporting Classics magazine](#) for 34 of its 35 years of existence, and there's no question that linkage has meant more to me as a writer than any publication for which I've produced material. These days the publication appears eight times a year, and as Editor at Large and Book Columnist I contribute the occasional feature, write a review column in every issue, and am involved in various projects behind the scenes on pretty much an ongoing basis. Right now I'm busy selecting material for a forthcoming anthology on quail hunting.

Then there are periodic assignments of all sorts. The current issue of [Smoky Mountain Living](#) has a feature of mine on a mountain Renaissance man, Judge Felix Alley, as well as a shorter and hopefully somewhat humorous piece on ramps (a particularly strong-smelling member of the leek family for those of you who might not be familiar with the wild vegetable). I just finished a little article for the [National Wild Turkey Federation's blog](#) on how I've always kept a record of turkeys I have killed by saving the spent shell, writing up a story of the hunt, and sticking the story and the bird's beard in the shell. Recently I completed an afterword for a special publication of a Rutledge story, "The Ocean's Menace," to be published as one in a series of five chapbooks bringing to light five long forgotten tales of his (I also wrote the general Foreword being used in all five of the chapbooks).

I've just begun what promises to be a fine working relationship with [Carolina Mountain Life magazine](#). My premier contribution to the publication, "The Magic of Marbles," is in the current issue. It takes a longing look back to when every boy worth his salt played marbles during the spring. Apparently they liked my work because in a recent conversation with the publisher, she invited me to contribute a column to each issue. It will likely carry the title "Mountain Wisdom and Ways" and will indulge in the kind of nostalgia connected with high country lifestyles and traditions I so cherish.

Throw in some garden work, an ample measure of frustration in the turkey woods (it has been my worst season ever, by far, and the first time since I started hunting turkeys that I haven't killed a bird in South Carolina), occasional work on a food blog I write for Leica, and you pretty well have it except for one thing. I'm spending far more hours on "[Profiles in Mountain Character](#)" than anything else, thanks to the fact that the manuscript is due in early fall.

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- **Trout fishing.** I not only fished on the weekend backcountry trips. Sometimes Daddy would rush home from work and we'd get three hours or so of late afternoon fishing in, but more commonly I rode my bike up to the home of my buddy whose father was a Park ranger and we fished lower Deep Creek or Indian Creek.

- **Eating trout.** Fresh from the stream and properly prepared, I would make a strong argument for trout being in a culinary class by themselves when it comes to freshwater fish. To be sure, a strong case can be made for walleye, crappie, bream, and perch, but for my part I'll take trout. Mind you not just any trout. I want small ones, and if it's legal I'd actually prefer those only five or six inches in length. If not, then I want those just big enough to keep. These smaller fish, prepared the way I like them best, can be eaten bones and all (see recipes below).

- **Tubing.** In today's world tubing in the Smokies has become so popular I don't even like to be in the most popular spots during peak season, but in my youth only locals did it. Any time there was a heavy rain and the creek rose appreciably in May was considered a prime time, because the stream really moved along at a rapid pace and there was no worry about wedging on rocks in low water situations. However, those rides were normally punctuated by a near-constant sighting of water snakes (perfectly harmless) dropping from limbs of bushes and trees overhanging the stream. Snakes were far, far more common than they are in the region today. I don't have a certain explanation but strongly suspect it involves the fact that wild hogs eat snakes whenever they find them.

- **Proms.** Although I will readily admit my number one interest throughout my teen years was outdoor activities, it would be wrong to suggest I had no interest in the fairer sex. I still harbor fond memories of my senior prom and can mentally walk through everything involved from when I first picked up my date (a former "steady" girlfriend who had rightly ceased to be my steady when I got involved in some silly "two timing"—I doubt if the word "steady" or the phrase "two timing" get much if any usage today) at the home of her aunt and uncle right through to evening's end.

- **Gardening.** It may seem strange for a teenager to have enjoyed gardening, but I did. I loved helping Dad and Grandpa Joe put in crops. Whether it involved onion sets, seed potatoes, cabbage plants, tomato plants, or seeds, I was intrigued and happy to be a part of it. Indeed, so much was that the case that during several boyhood years I raised my own little garden patch in addition to helping out with ones that had real meaning since canning produce was an important part of our livelihood.

- **Enjoying the first produce from the garden.** Greens, lettuce, kale, radishes, and the like will all have "made" before the month of May ends, and even today, when fresh vegetables adorn grocery shelves, there's nothing to match garden truck. Or, to put it another way, there's fresh and there's garden fresh,



and knowledgeable folks realize a wide gap separates the two (see "kilt" lettuce recipe below).

- **Picking wild strawberries.** Depending on the elevation, wild strawberries began to ripen late in May or early in June. They seemed to be far more plentiful than today, perhaps because there were a lot of old fields and pastures that hadn't yet grown up to the point where the wonderful little red orbs got shadowed out. Izaak Walton once wrote that "doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did." I'm wholeheartedly in his corner in that regard. A dead ripe wild strawberry, whether eaten fresh, used in shortcake, made into jam, or as topping for cereal, is pure, unbridled delight.



- **Putting pennies on the railroad tracks.** I'm sure this was illegal, although I'd like to think it wasn't dangerous. All I know for sure is that the trains in Bryson City would do a marvelous job of flattening out one of the old copper wheat pennies. If you know the phrase, "flat as a flitter," it was certainly applicable in this case.
- **Starting another warm month's period of sharing time with Al Dorsey,** an aged river rat who had spent time in the state penitentiary for murder, was a rank stranger to soap and water (and the rank is used advisedly as well as being drawn from a Ralph Stanley bluegrass classic), and knew more about catfishing than anyone I've ever met. Born into a prominent family, he had a rough life but found some peace in the end with conversion, cleaning up, and becoming an active member of the local Baptist Church. Just recently an ideal tombstone has been placed at his previously unmarked grave.
- **Whittling.** Honesty compels me to admit I don't do nearly as much whittling as I did when a boy, although I still feel naked without a pocket knife. That reduced amount of whittling probably says something about me, and I'm not at all sure it reveals anything positive. A fellow who whittles, whether he's shaping a slingshot or some craft item or merely making shavings, has time to contemplate; to enjoy the pleasant sight of a sharp blade cutting through wood in clean, sure fashion; and to rest his soul. All of those are good things.
- **Kibitzing.** A fair amount of the whittling I did as a youngster, not to mention a passel of it done by my elders, took place on the town square in Bryson City. The place went by two colloquial names—the one acceptable in any company was "Loafer's Glory" while the less proper but more expressive one was "Dead Pecker Corner." Call the location what you may, it was a gathering place for old men to swap lies, swap knives, play checkers, listen to itinerant preachers known as "Bible Thumpers" on Saturday, and offer a world of often unwanted but readily proffered criticism. That might involve a move in a checker

game, a fellow's choice of a pocket knife, the way he whittled, or indeed most anything. Thanks to a great 9th grade English teacher by the name of Thad DeHart, I added the word kibitz to my vocabulary at the age of fourteen, and I witnessed a world of it and even did a bit (although usually just as a quiet aside to Grandpa Joe) when a youngster.

The title of a book by one of my favorite outdoor writers, Archibald Rutledge, pretty well sums up my memories of May in yester-youth. The title is *Those Were the Days*, and my how I cherish them still. If you were lucky, indeed flat-out blessed, you had at least some of the memories noted above, no doubt buttressed by others depending on the location and time of your childhood, to treasure.

Speaking of Rutledge, a number of you have already requested notification when the book *Bird Dog Days, Wingshooting Ways*, an anthology of his writings on canine companions and the upland shooting life, appears. It is on track for July, and you'll hear from me as soon as it arrives. Also, if anyone hasn't notified me and is interested, [let me know](#).

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## RECIPES

### PAN-FRIED MOUNTAIN TROUT

Two or three small trout per person  
 Stone-ground cornmeal  
 Salt and pepper

Clean trout (there is no easier fish to clean—I provide full details on how in my book, *Fly Fishing in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park: An Insider's Guide to a Pursuit of Passion*, which is available through [this website](#)) and then place inside a Ziploc bag in which you have placed cornmeal and salt and black pepper. Shake thoroughly until each trout, including the body cavity, is thoroughly covered in meal. Place in a piping hot frying pan with enough lard or vegetable oil to cook them quickly (do not use olive oil). Cook until golden brown on both sides, turning once. If cooked with the oil just right—not too hot to burn them but you need to have sufficient heat to “seal” the flesh immediately—you can eat small trout bones and all. Or, if that bothers you, eat down the rib cage much like you would attack corn on the cob. Serve with fried potatoes and onions, a wild lettuce salad (or slaw) and finish off with one of my favorite back country sweets, peach or apricot crisp (recipe below).

### CAMPSITE PEACH OR APRICOT CRISP

This is a great recipe for the backpacker, because it involves minimal weight.

Dried apricots or peaches, placed in sufficient water to rehydrate them prior to cooking  
Brown sugar  
Crumbled Ritz crackers or graham crackers  
Three or four ounces of rum

Place rehydrated fruit in a large camp frying pan and crumble brown sugar on top of it. Then cover completely with the crackers. Cook until the juice from the fruit is bubbling to the top and sprinkle on the rum. Cook for another two minutes and serve hot.

### TROUT ALMANDINE ON THE TRAIL

This is a fine "fancy" dish for a backcountry fishing trip, but it works perfectly well at home too.

2 small or one medium trout per person  
Smoked almonds  
Lemon juice  
Margarine or butter

Chop the smoked almonds and melt butter in a frying pan and sauté them. Add lemon juice and stir until thoroughly heated. Keep mix hot while preparing trout by frying them in butter, turning once. When the trout are turned, top with the almond and butter sauce and finish cooking serve piping hot.

### TROUT OMELET

2 cups cooked and flaked trout  
6 large eggs  
2 heaping tablespoons cottage cheese  
½ cup minced onion  
½ cup chopped mushrooms  
½ cup fresh spinach, chopped  
Sour cream  
Butter

Mix eggs and vegetables in a small bowl then combine with cottage cheese and beat until fluffy. Pour into a buttered frying pan and cook slowly on low heat until the eggs start to set. At this point pour fish mixture on top, add a dollop of sour cream, and then carefully fold to finish cooking the omelet. Season with salt and pepper and top with paprika or chopped parsley if desired. Serves three or four.

### TROUT CORDON BLEU

2 medium trout  
4 slices Swiss cheese  
2 slices cooked ham  
¼ cup tomato sauce  
2 tablespoons smoked almonds, chopped fine  
1 beaten egg  
Flour  
Bread crumbs  
Butter

Season the trout with salt and pepper and roll in flour. Then dip in beaten egg and roll in bread crumbs. Stuff each trout with two small slices of cheese a slice of ham, a portion of tomato sauce, and a tablespoon of smoked almonds. Fry carefully in butter, turning once and checking with a fork. The fish is done when it flakes. Serves two.



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