

Joyce Kilmer- Slickrock Wilderness

BY BRENT MARTIN

When American poet, writer, and Sergeant Joyce Kilmer departed on the morning of July 30, 1918, to lead a scouting party to determine the location of a German machine gun, he would have never imagined that his memory would be forever preserved in a remote part of the Western North Carolina Mountains by a wilderness area bearing his name.

These were the final days of the Second Battle of Marne, and Kilmer, a member of the 69th Infantry Regiment and admired for his nerve in scouting into dangerous territory, was killed that afternoon by a German sniper's bullet near the French village of Seringes-et-Nesles. Kilmer was well established and popular as a poet when he entered the war in 1917, having published the poem "Trees" in *Poetry* magazine in 1913, and the collection, *Trees and Other Poems* the following year. He was considered by many the laureate of the Catholic Church and was widely regarded as a critic and lecturer.

(Photo by Mark Scherling)

So in 1934, when the Veterans of Foreign Wars petitioned the United States government to “examine its millions of forested acres and set aside a fitting area of trees to stand for all time as a living memorial” to Kilmer, the Forest Service decided on an uncut 3,800-acre area along Little Santeetlah Creek in Graham County. It was dedicated as the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest on July 30, 1936. Given that the Forest Service could have chosen from any number of areas from across the United States, that this magnificent grove of ancient tulip, beech, basswood, and hemlock trees won out speaks volumes to its rarity and spectacular beauty.

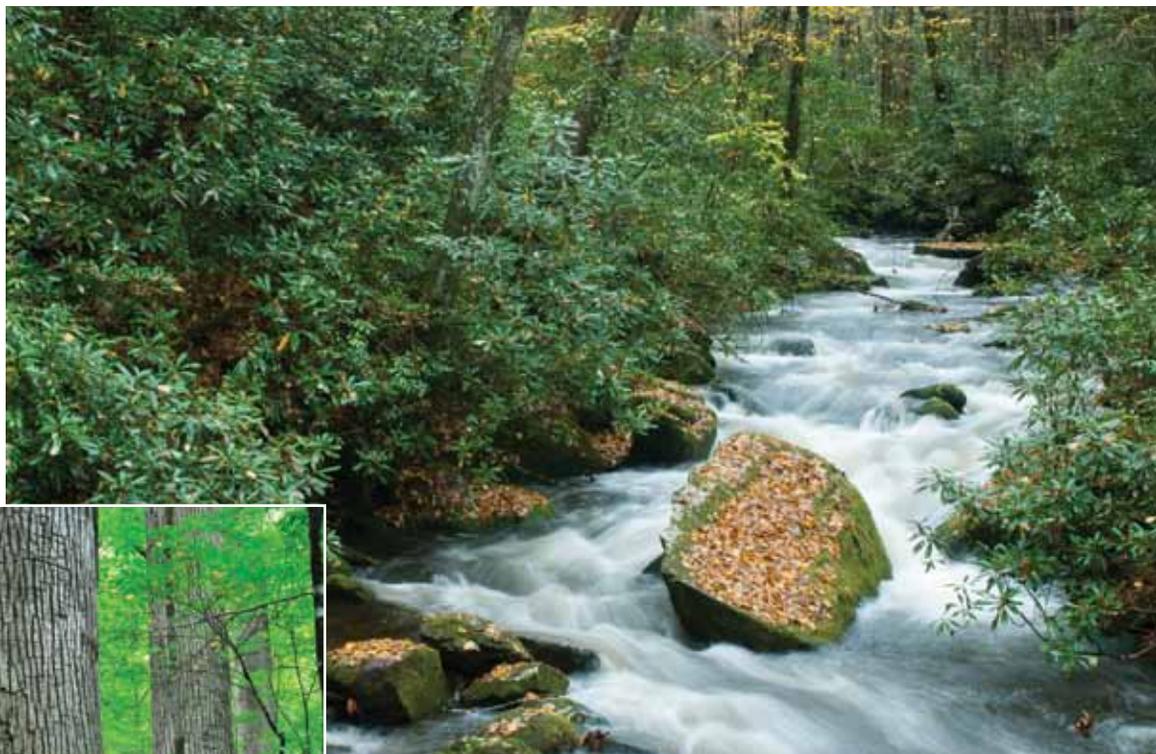
Almost 40 years later in 1975, Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness was established at over 17,000 acres with the passage of the Eastern Wilderness Act. The Eastern Wilderness Act was passed 11 years after the popular 1964 Wilderness Act (the 50th anniversary is this year), and protected 16 new Wilderness areas, totaling 207,000 acres, in the eastern United States.

Perhaps more importantly, the Eastern Wilderness Act overturned an emerging notion in Congress that Wilderness in the eastern United States was not possible due to a “purity standard,” which held that all lands in the east had been cutover or grazed, and were thereby impossible to designate as true wilderness as areas were deemed in the West.

Lying within one of the largest concentrations of wild lands in the Southeast, Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness and Memorial Forest is an incredible destination for those wanting to see a part of Western North Carolina that is remote and rugged, yet completely accessible. Access to the Memorial Forest

is an easy two-mile loop trail, which takes visitors through the forest of ancient giants, beginning in a paved parking area approximately 12 miles from Robbinsville. The parking area is equipped with bathrooms, picnic tables, and an interpretive kiosk.

Once on the loop trail, travelers can gain a quick understanding of what this type of southern Appalachian forest looked like 400 years ago. Unfortunately, the giant



(Photo by Bill Hodge)

hemlocks which once graced the path have been infested with an exotic insect, the hemlock woolly adelgid, and have been taken down for safety reasons.

For those wanting an extended visit, try the many trails within the 16,000-acre Citico Creek Wilderness, which joins Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock to the west along its Tennessee border. The scenic Benton MacKaye Trail, honoring the architect of the Appalachian Trail and founding member of The Wilderness Society, traverses the region between the two. To the south is the spectacular Cherochala Skyway, linking the Joyce Kilmer area to Tellico Plains, Tennessee. The Skyway rivals the Blue Ridge Parkway in its beauty and views, without the traffic and millions of visitors.

It is an area rich in history, beauty, and recreational opportunities, and not to be missed in your visits into the mountains of Western North Carolina.

For additional information visit the Partners of the Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness website (joycekilmerslickrock.com). Brent Martin has spent most of his adult life working in forest and farmland conservation in the mountains of north Georgia and Western North Carolina. Since 2007, he has served as the regional director for the Southern Appalachian Office of The Wilderness Society. The Wilderness Society (wilderness.org) is the leading American conservation organization working to protect our nation's shared wildlands. Its mission is to protect wilderness and inspire Americans to care for our wild places.



(Photo by Mark Schmerling)