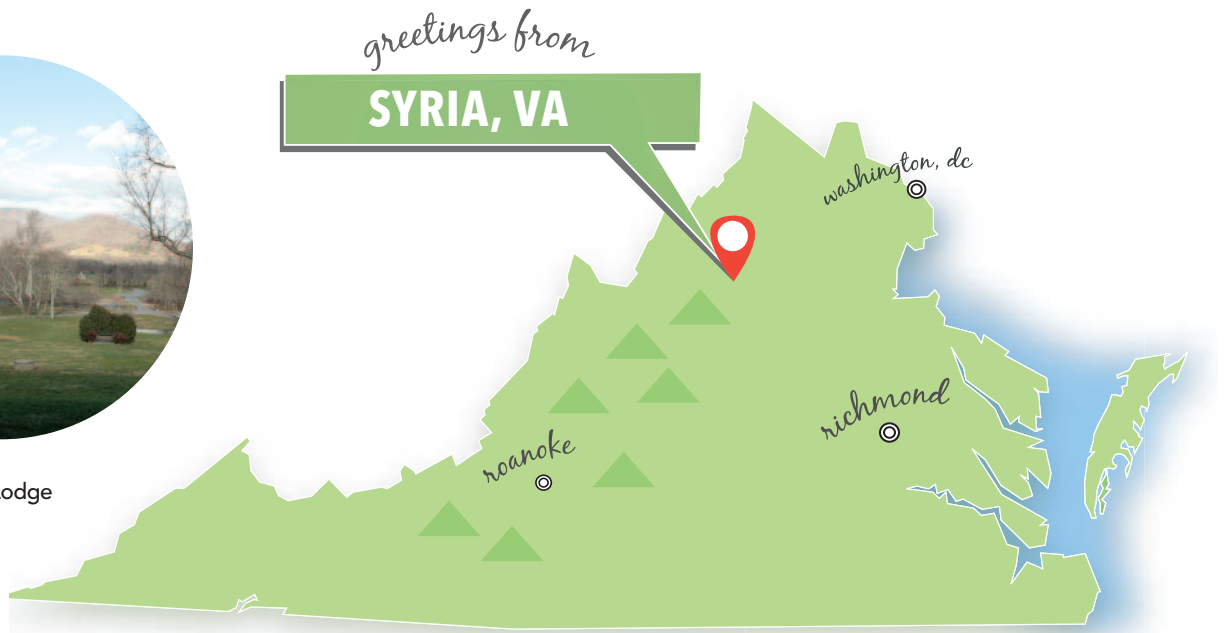




The view from Graves' Mountain Lodge



Kenneth McCoy, M.D.

Syria: Serene and Settled

There may be fewer people in this tiny mountain village than a century ago, but Syria is still thriving, thanks to serenity and hospitality.

Kenneth McCoy, M.D., is a man after my own heart. Never mind that he's 58 years my senior. As I wander about the rooms in his quiet little house just north of Syria, Virginia, less than a mile from the boundary with Shenandoah National Park, I am enthralled by his framed photography — pictures from a half a century of wandering around the country and around the globe.

"That's Monument Valley," I remark, "and Arches National Park. Taos, New Mexico. Cades Cove. Antelope Canyon." I marvel at the fine-art black-and-white photographs, capturing a pool of sunlight cascading into a slot canyon at noon, framing the earthen oven no doubt baking Pueblo fry bread.

"Well, you've been all the places I've been!" says Dr. McCoy, leaning a little on his cane, telling me, only a little bit regretfully, that these days he can walk no more than a mile at a time. This from a man who has hiked the length of the Appalachian Trail twice, who has hiked in Kenya, Scotland, Germany, Nova Scotia.

A WALK IN THE WOODS

Born in northwest North Dakota, second oldest of four brothers, he made his career as an Army pathologist, only to retire abruptly in 1974, when he learned he had advanced-stage colon cancer. He divorced about the same time, deciding all at once, given his oncologist's cautions, that he probably didn't have much time left.

"I thought my life was going to be cut short," he says, "so I decided to retire and do what I wanted."

An avid hiker in the mountains of Virginia (given he worked in Washington, D.C.), McCoy found himself walking down Finks Hollow Lane in Syria one day, noticed a house for sale, and decided to buy it on what might have been a whim to anyone else.

That was 41 years ago.

He's still here.

His cancer is long gone.

His love for Syria remains, however. Up until eight years ago when his neighbor and close friend Willis Foster died, the two of them hiked the surrounding mountains

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Graves' Mountain Lodge (top, left to right) is the focus of activity in the sedate, serene community of Syria. The Graves family includes Missy, Lucky, Jimmy, Rachel, shown here in the dining room of Graves' Mountain Lodge. Syria Mercantile is where you can find everything from mail to snacks and sodas.

together and frequently walked from Syria up to Big Meadows Lodge in Shenandoah National Park for breakfast, a distance of about seven-and-a-half miles. "I was a fast hiker," McCoy remarks.

And while McCoy's hiking days may be at an end, the fruits of all those walks are preserved on the walls of his mountain home. Thirty years ago, he says, "I took photography up with a vengeance." And he has kept up with the times, too, moving from film (which he developed in his own darkroom) to digital six years ago.

I find many of his pictures on display at Graves' Mountain Lodge, a well-known mountain getaway spot for northern Virginians, about a mile downstream from McCoy's house. The property, part of a 1,400-acre-or-so tract of land that has, in one form or another, been in the Graves family for more than a century-and-a-half, hosts a lodge, cabins, restaurant, and pick-your-own apple orchard.

MORE THAN FOUR CENTURIES IN VIRGINIA

While the first Graveses came to Virginia via Jamestown in 1608, Graves' Mountain Lodge proprietor Jimmy Graves says, "In 1740, they came here. It took

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them 140 years to get to the mountains." In 1852, Paschal Graves opened an inn along the Blue Ridge Turnpike. That property is now part of Shenandoah National Park. The land currently occupied by the lodge and orchards has been in the Graves family for six generations ... since 1857.

Jimmy says his family has been in the apple business since 1825. Today, the Graves family has just under 100 acres in orchards that, according to Jimmy's son Lucky, produce about 10,000 bushels a year. They direct-market almost all the apple harvest to visitors who come to pick their own or buy pre-picked apples by the bushel in the fall. The only thing they wholesale today are their famous Graves' Mountain preserves.

While humans have lived and hunted in the mountains around Syria for thousands of years (Jimmy has found arrowheads on his property dating to 9,000 B.C.), this little village didn't get on the map, so to speak, until 1898, when the Syria post office was formed. The residents at the time chose the name Syria out of the Bible. There is only



Irvin Katenbrink (left), U.S. Army Ret., moved to Syria with his wife Jean in 1987. These days he spends time at the packing shed (below).



Irvin Katenbrink says, 'I wasn't lucky enough to be born here, but was smart enough to move here as soon as I could.'

one other town in the country with the name, and that's in Indiana.

Syria is a small place and getting smaller, despite the influx of second-home owners who have bumped local real estate prices up to the degree that restored farmhouses with land now often fetch \$1 million-plus. At the time of World War II, Jimmy says, over 500 residents registered to receive rations. "Those would have been people that came out of the mountains right outside the national park," he adds. Today only about 200 people live in the Syria zip code.

NOT-SO-NEWCOMERS

Among them is Col. Irvin Katenbrink, U.S. Army-Ret., who moved to Syria with his wife Jean in 1987, after a 30-year military career. The Atlanta native has served in Korea, Vietnam, Germany, and as an educator at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. The Katenbrinks found Syria through an advertisement that ran in *The Washington Post* for apple picking at Graves' Mountain Lodge. After that, the couple and their three children kept coming back every October.

Once their kids had grown up, the couple found themselves driving around in the mountains and discovered a home for sale. "Jean turned and asked me, 'would you like to live here?'" says Katenbrink. The rest is history. The Katenbrinks took up permanent residence in Syria in 1987.

Jean has since passed away, but Katenbrink still lives in the house they bought together. "It's on a dirt road," he notes. "There are bears in the backyard. It's quiet. It's peaceful, and the people here are nice." Katenbrink adds, "I wasn't lucky enough to be born here, but I was smart enough to move here as soon as I could."

And while plenty of rural areas might have residents less than hospitable to outsiders, particularly those from the city, Katenbrink has found quite the opposite to be true in Syria. "Jimmy and Rachel (Graves) are very kind people," he says. "We were outsiders, but they were always generous to us."

In retirement, in fact, Katenbrink has found himself in charge of the packing shed, and jokes, "They won't fire you, and they won't pay you either!"

The jesting is all in good fun, as the Graves clan invites both Katenbrink and myself to join them for a southern-style Sunday lunch on a day that isn't Sunday. Spread over a long table in the lodge overlooking the mountain views are fried chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes, fried apples, pasta salad, cranberries, hot rolls, corn pudding, and green salad. My plate is heaping, but this is what hospitality looks like at Graves' Mountain Lodge.

"We've had fried chicken every Sunday for lunch for as long as I can remember," says Jimmy. And that was well before the lodge, which Jimmy and Rachel opened in 1965, shortly after they married. "Sometimes we had 35 people staying in

the house in the summer," Jimmy remembers of his growing-up years in Syria. With only two bathrooms and an outhouse, things got crowded pretty quickly. "In the summer," Jimmy remarks, "we'd bathe in the river."

In those days, Graves' Mountain was a pretty self-sufficient place. "We had gardens, killed hogs, smoked hams, churned butter," remembers Jimmy. "And we still did all those things when we first opened the lodge. The first year we cooked on a wood cook stove."

The lodge has since modernized, though the rocking chairs on the front porches still remain, as does the rural nature of the place. All one will see from the front porch of the lodge are mountains, orchards, fields, and a couple of farmhouses. On the busiest weekend, Graves' Mountain Lodge can accommodate up to 400 guests, and Jimmy says about half their guests every year are repeats.

And while the human residents of Syria, at least full-time ones, are dwindling, the wildlife population is growing. "When I was going to school," Jimmy says, "Madison County didn't have deer." Now the county, like so many in Virginia, is overpopulated with them, and the same would seem to go for black bears.

"The first bear I remember seeing on the property was in the '80s," says Rachel.

Jimmy adds, "Now some nights you'll see as many as eight bears." While the bears will stay in the mountains when there is a good acorn crop, they come down to the farmland in the hollows and valleys around harvest time if pickings are slim in the national park.

"The bears seems to like Honey Crisp and Ginger Gold apples the best," says Lucky, and he's not even joking. The Graveses have had many years of severe crop depredation because of bears.

But the bears, like the apples, are part of the draw for visitors here. Plus, the lack of cellphone service. Last fall, the Graveses estimate more than 15,000 people showed up for their annual Apple Harvest Festival. In June, the lodge hosts the Festival of Music, featuring bluegrass, Americana and Roots music. There couldn't be a more perfect spot for pickin', whether it's apples or banjo. ... ■