

Unsung Virginian recognized for leadership in preserving Central Virginia's historic battlefield trails



Dorse is never without his cedar walking pole. He has presented many such poles that he hand-carved to friends who've joined him in working to maintain local trails.

The Virginia, Maryland & Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives (VMDAEC) has selected Spotsylvania County's Dorse Counts as this year's Unsung Virginian.

A Rappahannock Electric Cooperative (REC) member, Counts has devoted countless hours over nearly 30 years to maintaining and preserving historic trails, primarily those within Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park.

Few trails convey such powerful echoes of the past as these that wind through the now-tranquil fields and woods along Wilderness Run, just south of Route 3 and east of Route 20 in Spotsylvania County. Counts' soft brown eyes glisten as he listens to his friend Paul Alderman describe how in May 1864, Union and Confederate forces clashed horribly at this site in what came to be known as the Battle of the Wilderness.

"For decades, loggers cut and recut the area's forests to fuel nearby iron furnaces and build plank roads, leaving behind an impenetrable mix of deadfall, brush and re-emerging growth," explains Alderman, a fellow volunteer and history buff. "Not only did the dense vegetation make it impossible for troops to stay in battle formation, but constant shelling ignited the underbrush, burning hundreds of wounded soldiers whose cries echoed through the smoke and darkness."

This Civil War battle marked the first time Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee and U.S. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant matched wits — and the beginning of the end for the southern cause, as Grant, despite severe losses, refused to yield.

Created in 1927, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park commemorates the Battle of the Wilderness and three other Civil War battles. A decade later, as Virginia's electric cooperatives were getting their start, skilled workers in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) constructed roads and bridges throughout the park to help improve public access.

By the 1970s, the National Park Service (NPS) had acquired more parcels of land, expanding the park to its present size of more than 8,000 acres. The story of this year's Unsung Virginian begins soon after, when the NPS created Lake Wilderness after constructing a dam across Wilderness Run.

"My wife Maureen and I built one of the first three houses in the Lake Wilderness neighborhood, choosing our site for its water views and natural beauty," Counts recalls.

At the time, he was working as a maintenance manager for the Occoquan Water Authority. Curious about the area's history, he began exploring what remained of the Civil War-era trails around his home.

"I discovered that several CCC bridges had been lost due to flooding and the passage of time," Counts says. He quickly realized that NPS was short on employees to care for so many miles of trails across the public lands.

Belying his soft-spoken demeanor, Counts is a compelling leader. Bob Johnson, a retiree from the nearby Lake of the Woods development, shares Counts' enthusiasm for preservation.

"Dorse was serving as trail overseer for the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club's (PATC) Federal Line Trail in Spotsylvania County when we met. He encouraged me to become trail overseer for the Gordon Flank Attack Loop Trail in Orange County," Johnson says.

With retirement giving both men more free time, Counts and Johnson formed the Wilderness Battlefields Ground Force. For nearly two decades, its volunteers have maintained and improved the trail system according to PATC's rigorous environmental and preservationist standards.

"With support from the park ranger, we focused on efforts to reduce erosion and help protect fragile banks along Wilderness Creek and its tributaries," Johnson continues. "Dorse designed and led construction of seven pedestrian bridges, one of which replaced a large CCC bridge that had washed out following a huge rainfall. The replacement was built on land and dragged into position on sturdy electric poles — donated by REC — and laid horizontally across the creek. The poles are held in place by metal cables that help prevent the bridges from being washed downstream during a flood."

2017 Good Samaritan



Dorse Counts points to a metal spike, part of the original bridge over Wilderness Run constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The replacement bridge, laid atop utility poles, is anchored by cables to prevent it from washing downstream during a flood.



Dorse shows fellow volunteer Paul Alderman the damage from a recent storm that was blocking a portion of the Federal Line Trail.



During the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps built several bridges to improve access to the Wilderness Battlefield.



From left, Association Board Chairman Larry Howdysell, Dorsey Counts, Maureen Counts, REC President & CEO Kent Farmer and Bob Johnson at the March 17 Unsung Virginian Award Ceremony.

Counts also led installation of numerous water bars — long pieces of wood angled across steep sections of trail and held in place by long metal spikes that serve to divert rainfall and reduce erosion.

Johnson says of his friend's dedication, "The reports I send to PATC and the Park Service note that Dorsey is in the woods nearly every day of the year, removing blow-down trees and litter. He's chalked up an average of 20 hours a week for many years now."

John Storke, chief of maintenance for the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Battlefield, says that volunteer effort is crucial to help handle the more than 500,000 people who visit Fredericksburg-area battlefields each year.

"I estimate that our volunteers provide the equivalent of 15 full-time staff," he says, adding, "Boy Scouts and other groups are a big help on weekends, but Dorsey's consistent leadership really helped us prepare for the influx of visitors we received a few years back, during the Civil War sesquicentennial."

A few years ago, Counts' abilities attracted the notice of the Germanna Foundation, a nonprofit organization in Orange County seeking to preserve the heritage of original German settlers in the area.

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— Bob Johnson,
friend and volunteer

"Dorsey and I were approached by foundation representatives for help to improve access to historic sites in their 179-acre Siegen Forest," Johnson says. "Dorsey ended up designing, clearing and marking four historic trails that allow visitors to experience the beauty of the Rapidan River."

Counts' skills have also benefited area youth. He recently supported Teen Challenge of North Central Virginia by upgrading three buildings at the Beauty for Ashes Women's Shelter and has led several Eagle Scout projects at the Wilderness Battlefield.

The Unsung Virginian Award honors outstanding citizens for services rendered to the Commonwealth without thought of personal gain, but Counts' wife, Maureen, shares how such selflessness can provide unexpected benefits to the dedicated volunteers.

"Dorsey and Bob saved each other's lives through their volunteer work," she begins.

Maureen explains that as part of Johnson's recovery from open-heart surgery a decade earlier, he was instructed to get regular exercise. This prescription led him to meet Counts and become active in trails preservation, and Johnson has remained healthy ever since.

'I'd just moved to Lake Wilderness a few years ago and was out walking my dog when I ran across Dorse taking care of the trails. He's a legend!'

— Christine Piel,
REC member

One morning about three years ago, Johnson went to pick up Counts at his house for a day of trail work, only to discover his friend looked pale and felt unwell.

Maureen explains, "I'd tried without success to convince Dorse to go to the doctor, but Bob took one look at him and called 911."

Counts ended up in intensive care and was hospitalized for a full week, eventually being diagnosed with the tick-borne illness ehrlichiosis. Thanks to Bob's insistence on that fateful day, he's since made a full recovery.

Now 80 years old, Counts continues to share his love of trails with all he meets.

"I'd just moved to Lake Wilderness a few years ago and was out walking my dog when I ran across Dorse taking care of the trails," says Christine Piel, the REC member who nominated Counts for the Unsung Virginian Award. "He's a legend!" she exclaims.

Johnson and Piel worked with Counts' friends and family to organize a March 17 surprise ceremony at the Lake Wilderness Clubhouse. Several electric cooperative leaders, including REC President & CEO Kent Farmer, attended this event at which VMDAEC Board Chairman Larry Howdyshe presented Counts with his award in the form of a bronze plaque.

"Because of dedicated volunteers such as Dorse, important sites in the history of our nation are being preserved for countless generations to experience and appreciate," Howdyshe said.

Farmer also applauded Counts' initiative. "I've met exceptional volunteers across our 22-county service territory, but Dorse stands out. We're proud to count him as one of our members." ■

You Can Nominate a Good Samaritan or Unsung Virginian

Recipients of the Good Samaritan Award and the Unsung Virginian Award are chosen by an awards committee of the Virginia, Maryland & Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives (VMDAEC). This committee is made up of members of the boards of directors of VMDAEC's 15 member cooperatives.

The VMDAEC Awards Committee this year is inviting readers of *Cooperative Living* magazine to nominate candidates to be considered for the two prestigious statewide awards.

The Unsung Virginian Award recognizes a Virginian who has done great philanthropic work with no public praise or recognition. The Good Samaritan Award recognizes a person whose good deeds may or may not have been publicly recognized. The Good Samaritan Award recipient may or may not be a Virginian.

If you're interested in nominating someone for the Unsung Virginian or Good Samaritan awards, please fill out the nomination form on page 36 of this issue, and mail it to Vikki Heath at 4201 Dominion Blvd., Suite 101, Glen Allen, VA 23060, Attn. Awards Program.

Or go online to www.vmdaec.com/content/awards and fill out the nomination form online. Deadline for nominations is Oct. 15. ■

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