Introduction

This book was to be a praise-song for an Appalachian autumn, full of the happenings and special beauties of this loveliest of Pennsylvania’s seasons, and so it is. But autumn is a bittersweet time, a reminder that in life there is death and in death life as the natural system partially shuts down after a spectacular season of harvest and fulfillment. Most of the birds flee south, many animals hibernate or sleep away a good portion of late autumn and winter, and the last wildflowers wither and die. It is a season of good-byes, when, after the flaming leaves fall and start the inevitable process of decay, we are left with only the bare bones of nature. Those natural companions who can neither migrate nor hibernate—the deer and turkeys, ruffed grouse and rabbits, squirrels and songbirds, foxes and coyotes—become more visible, so autumn is a good time for wildlife watching. The weather can be warm and beguiling, most of the biting insects are gone, and the clear, crisp days bring out the wanderlust in me.

It is easy to move through the woods, walking miles along the ridgetop, stopping to sit with my back against a tree or lying in a bed of newly fallen leaves. As I fade into the background, the animals come alive—turkeys stalk toward me, bent on looking for food; a buck sails past, grunting loudly in hot pursuit of a doe; and chipmunks chase each other with such concentration that they run over my outstretched legs, thinking they are just two more fallen tree branches. Red, fox, and gray squirrels are busily harvesting whatever acorns have fallen and barely notice me.
Introduction

But other sounds and sights frequently disturb my reveries. Those are made by man, the harvester. In the valley below and on the mountainside, I can hear the noise of tractors, of guns, and of chain saws as farmers gather in their crops, hunters harvest wild meat, and woodlot owners cut their winter heating supply—all too a part of the natural cycle. Once, when we were young, we also grew most of our food, killed animals for meat, and cut our dead trees for firewood. Like most Americans, however, we have gradually let others supply those basic needs. Still, we understand the desires of many of our neighbors to harvest the surplus as long as they are careful not to take too much or to destroy the basis for their productivity—the soil, water, and wildlife. Those resources belong to everyone, and if they are destroyed, we will be destroyed too.

Unfortunately, though, many landowners consider what they do to their property to be their own business, even if it impacts their neighbors. That has been the situation here for most of the years we have lived on our wooded mountaintop, particularly in autumn when, several times, adjacent landowners decided not to harvest their woodlots sustainably, but to either take off all the big trees or, in the worst-case scenario, to clear-cut the steep mountain slopes with no thought of those living below. So the sound of chain saws, even those used by people who are cutting firewood, sends me into a panic. Who is cutting now and where? Must we again try to stop the irresponsible rape of the forest?

For thirteen years we have been fighting loggers who threatened our access road. In our innocence we bought this property—150 acres, more or less, of mountaintop land—in 1971 and never stopped to ask who owned the land on either side of our primitive, mile-and-a-half access road. For seven years we lived in peace with our elderly neighbors, Margaret and her brother Fred. We knew that
they did not own their land and home, but Margaret often said that she had promised her mother never to cut the trees on what had once been their family’s property. We assumed she had enough influence on the landowner, a businessman from Kentucky, to keep those 120 acres safe.

However, shortly after Fred died in the winter of 1977–78, we began a three-year battle along with Margaret to protect the road and the lowest portion of the hollow from a planned clear-cut by another absentee owner. My husband, Bruce, led the battle. He elicited the support of an engineering professor in his struggle to reduce the weight limit on the county bridge over the river that provides access to our road. We had several meetings with attorneys and the county commissioners about the matter. Bruce also talked with officials in the state’s Department of Environmental Resources about maintaining the purity of the stream in Plummer’s Hollow, which flows into the Little Juniata River at the base of the mountain.

But the critical issue was the threat to our road, our life-line to the outside, posed by the use of heavy equipment on or near it. Our fears about the effects of lumbering directly above the road on the steep mountain slopes were confirmed by a geologist on the faculty of the university. He explained that a major lineament, a type of fault, stretched for miles along the river valley, and it was surrounded along its entire length by a maze of smaller lineaments and fracture traces which etched the mountains and valleys within a couple of miles on either side. These lineaments and fracture traces conduct water and cause landslides, he explained, wherever the earth is disturbed. Even minor disturbances to the forest directly above our road in the hollow where these lineaments and fracture traces crossed might produce small earth slides that would take out our road.
Introduction

After much negotiation, the logger who had been hired to clear-cut the property agreed to attend a meeting with several state officials and the geologist. He listened carefully to the geologist’s presentation and decided a few weeks later to withdraw from the job. The landowner then wanted to sell his land, and after a long struggle to clear the titles, we were able to buy the property—one section in 1984 and the other in 1985, but not before the end of the ridge was selectively cut by another logger hired by the landowner.

In 1986, the owner of Margaret’s land, the Kentucky businessman, decided he wanted to lumber his property. He hired a local attorney and pressured us about his right to use our road for his timbering operation. Since the lowest portion of the road was now completely on our land, (as of 1985) we were able to prevent this destruction.

That fall the Kentucky businessman sold the property to a lumberman who operated a sawmill twenty-five miles away in the southern end of the county. He indicated a firm determination to cut down the trees on his newly acquired property, but by the autumn of 1991, when I decided to carefully chronicle the daily natural occurrences in the woods, fields, and hollow, the lumbering had still not taken place. The danger to the hollow seemed remote since he had been threatening for years and had not followed through.

In order for the story of the autumn of 1991 to be clear, it is necessary to give a few of the details of our five years of attempts to negotiate with the man. When Bruce first met him and his forester along the road in early 1987 he had been assured that they planned to cut only the big dead trees on his property—and maybe some of the bigger live trees also. The lumberman was friendly and jovial so we were optimistic that a reasonable compromise could be reached.
Introduction

At a meeting in June, however, when we refused to allow him the use of our road, the lumberman’s tone changed considerably. He tried both blustering and bullying us, declaring that our road was a public right of way, and claiming that his property line followed not the road, as both of our deeds indicated, but the stream that flowed about fifty feet below the road. He insisted that he could block us along the four thousand feet of roadway that, he alleged, was completely on his property, and he could put gates along the road to prevent our access.

The forester was as persistent as the lumberman. He insisted that they had the right to cut down to the property line, which they planned to do. Bruce tried to explain about fracture traces and lineaments, and that cutting trees next to or below the road would destroy it, but he got only bland assurances from the forester that they would never harm the road. Since our land now totally surrounded their property, Bruce maintained that, if they wanted permission to skid their logs across our property to the hollow entrance, they would have to agree to stay well above the road in their work. They refused to make such an agreement. The lumberman did reassure us repeatedly that they would never do a clear-cut—that was a terrible way to cut wood. This statement was repeated several times by the forester during subsequent conversations: his boss only did careful, selective cutting jobs and was widely known for the responsible work he did in the woods.

Nearly three years went by, a period of continual efforts by Bruce to reopen negotiations. The forester studied the property deeds and decided that our property did not completely surround theirs, as we had believed. A survey confirmed his claim that there was a 219-foot gap that allowed access to the lumberman’s land from a neighbor’s property on the highway side of the mountain. At a meeting in our attorney’s office in February 1990 the lumber-
man indicated that, since his right of way through the neighbor's property into his own land was now secure, he would begin cutting immediately. But he would not agree to stay even 200 feet above the road. Desperate to save our access road, I proposed that we agree to a land swap. In exchange for the steep strip of land 200 feet above the road, we would give them comparable acreage on top of the mountain containing roughly an equivalent number of trees. The lumberman seemed eager to compromise this far at least. His forester would do the initial survey of trees on both properties and then share the results by hiking over the area with Bruce. After that, we would hire our own forester to do an estimate of the comparative tree values on both properties. Once this was finished, we would complete the deal by hammering out our differences.

The forester was obviously not happy with the deal—he really did not believe there would be any problem in cutting the trees right down to their property line—but the lumberman seemed pleased. He agreed to my proposal, and as the meeting broke up he said about Bruce, "I like this pup, even if he does give me a lot of trouble."

The forester marked the trees on both properties, and one September morning he and Bruce and our son Steve hiked over the area. Bruce indicated at the end of the walk that he would like to proceed as we had agreed. He wanted to hire his own expert to make calculations for us, and we would share the forester's calculations with the person we hired. They could then get together to resolve any differences. The forester hesitated, but finally said he would talk with his boss about that and get back to us.

Ominously, we heard nothing about the lumbering. In October 1950, Margaret finally decided, because of her advancing age, to leave her lifelong home on the mountain to live with friends in town. During the spring Bruce
Introduction

tried to press the lumberman to help with road maintenance work—if he had the right to use the road, he had the obligation to help keep it up—but after a phone call and several letters were not answered, Bruce gave up trying to work with him. In his last letter to the lumberman about road maintenance, Bruce threatened to change the lock on the gate at the entrance to the hollow if he didn’t respond. We heard nothing from him so Bruce finally changed the lock in late June.

The summer of 1991 was the driest on record, and all signs pointed to a spectacular autumn ahead. It would be a perfect year to record an Appalachian autumn—the wildlife and plants preparing for winter, humanity storing nature’s surplus. The proposed lumbering seemed like a remote issue.