Where the Rivers Meet

A private Eden becomes West Virginia’s newest slice of public land.

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY TYLER EVERT
Jack and Claudia Workman loved their land at Alum Creek. For years, the couple lived and operated their business at the confluence of the Big Coal and Little Coal rivers and enjoyed the flowers and the wildlife there.

Claudia passed away in 2014 and Jack in 2016 but, before they were gone, they made sure their legacies would live on through the Forks of Coal State Natural Area—a 102-acre parcel of public land donated to the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources. Jack signed the property over to the DNR in late fall 2015, not long before he died.

“He just loved that property,” says Kevin Dials, the DNR’s acting superintendent of the natural area. “He loved getting out and seeing the wildlife and he wanted to share that with everybody. He was hoping, by having the DNR manage it, protect it, and educate folks on the wildlife, that they would be able to do that even more than he did.”

The Workmans
Jack, originally of Madison, and Claudia, a Michigan native, shared several patents, including one for a type of thermoplastic pipe used in the mining industry. Claudia was reportedly the first woman to graduate from the University of Michigan’s chemical engineering program. They built their business about 14 miles south of Charleston off U.S. Route 119 in the early 1980s, as industry and development were beginning to pick up in the area.

The Workmans were also nature lovers. “They were kind of self-taught naturalists,” Dials says. “Claudia was a very, very keen naturalist, and they enjoyed viewing the wildlife along the river and at a pond up by their home.”

The Workmans built their personal preserve a piece at a time. The land donated to DNR was originally six separate parcels, and it still has the foundations and cellars from old homesteads. There also used to be a school not far from the natural area’s parking area.

“Around 1920, there were two foot bridges built: one that crossed the Big Coal River and one that crossed the Little Coal,” Dials says. “And they came together right at the point where the rivers flow together. Those were built so the kids on either side of the river could come across and attend school.” The bridges are still there, although they’re not in great shape anymore.
The property also contains the site of Kanawha County’s first Girl Scout camp, Camp Roof Rock. The camp was located on what is now the natural area’s Yellow Trail. Remnants of the bathhouse can still be seen on the river bank. “There’s a big rock formation that kind of sticks out into the Big Coal River,” Dials says. “On top and over to the other side of that was the Girl Scout camp.”

As the Workmans got older and less mobile, they roamed their land using golf carts. “After Claudia passed, Jack was starting to take stock of what he had there. Toward the end of his life, he wanted to make sure something was done with the property that would allow folks to enjoy what he enjoyed there,” Dials says.

An Ongoing Legacy
Today, the Forks of Coal State Natural Area is covered with wildflowers. The land has hiking trails that are not too strenuous, as well as scenic overlooks. It’s a prime spot for bird watching. And then, of course, there are the rivers.

But the centerpiece of the natural area will be the Claudia L. Workman Wildlife Education Center. Construction hasn’t started yet—DNR plans to break...
Hunting isn’t allowed at the Forks of Coal State Natural Area, but it’s a great place for hikers, bird-watchers, wildflower lovers, and anglers. The area offers prime fishing holes, as long as you don’t mind climbing down a riverbank. The DNR plans to add fishing access areas in the future.
ground in fall 2017. Once completed, the wildlife education center will feature animals that can be found in the Coal River watershed. It will also likely serve as a welcome area for those who want to learn more about the state’s elk restocking program in Logan and Mingo counties, about an hour from the natural area. “The facility could very well serve as the gateway to Elk Country,” Dials says.

The Forks of Coal Foundation was established in July 2016 to raise money for an endowment that will cover future upkeep and maintenance costs for the education center. “We’re just now getting started,” foundation president Kim McCluskey says. “We’ve become incorporated, got a very strong board, and had our first event out there. We’re really now putting on our thinking caps as to how to get money.” McCluskey says the foundation is looking to raise around $1.5 million to get started.

For more information about the Forks of Coal Foundation or to make a donation, visit www.forksofcoalfoundation.org.