

CAPTURING VANISHING CULTURES

By **MARGARET SHUSTER**

Herald-Citizen Staff



Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea

CRAWFORD -- Photographer **Jack Stoddart** is no stranger to change. He has spent his nearly 40-year career documenting vanishing ways of life -- people and art forms being crowded out by the new -- from the old-timey farmers in the backwoods of Overton County to the Gulf Coast fishermen who still use nets.

(Lynne and Jack Stoddart go for a stroll on their farm in Overton County, TN)

And he's just achieved a career pinnacle: The Smithsonian Museum of American History and the Tennessee State Museum want his work.

"As of 2007, the Smithsonian is going to add 25 of our pieces into their archives," said Stoddart. The Tennessee State Museum will also be adding 35 of his pieces to their permanent display.

The pieces going to both museums are from Stoddart's "Plateau Collection," a series of photos he made in the 1970s of the characters and farms he discovered when he moved from Miami to the Upper Cumberland.

Stoddart and his wife, Lynne, who taught him photography, drove here in their home -- a VW bus -- and discovered a pocket of Overton County virtually untouched by modern living, a place where people still grew, raised and cooked their food, built their homes by hand and helped their neighbors as a matter of course.

"In 1975 or '76, all our friends were old hill people, coal miners," said Stoddart. "People were still making whiskey and raising their own meat. It was subsistence living. It was perfect subject matter, so outside the scope of what we were used to."

The Stoddarts bought 48 acres for \$7,500 at the foot of Highland Mountain and set up housekeeping in a tiny cabin with no running water. The inexpensive lifestyle allowed Stoddart to pursue his art.

"We were raising gardens and doing what our neighbors did, so we never needed much money," said Stoddart. "We went on for years like that."

Stoddart worked two jobs, one in a sawmill and the other as an assistant to veterinarian Dr. Wynn Easterly.

"Everybody -- every old farmer, everyone with a mule or hunting dog or cat -- came to Dr. Easterly to get their animals treated. From working for him for three years, almost four, I got to know almost everybody."

Stoddart bought film as he could afford it and began taking pictures of the natives, exploring one of the last vestiges of a way of life that even 30 years before had nearly been extinguished.

"We earned their trust because we didn't drive by and photograph -- we lived with them and became part of the community," said Stoddart.

The hill people took the Stoddarts under wing and taught them how to grow their food and milk their cows. They paid visits and got to know them.

"Everybody from Miami was intense and greedy," said Stoddart. "Everyone here was sweet and made time for each other. They had more options. People thought they were poor old hillbillies -- they were people who had chosen to live another way."

But within a few years, Stoddart's new neighbors were mostly gone.

"It's over. It's long over," he said. "Claude Smith was the last man standing. I think some of them moved off to work, some died. Claude Ramsey stayed. He was a hermit. He was one of the first people I met. It was unbelievable to me. It was like meeting Davy Crockett."

Modernization has recently changed Stoddart's way of life, too. The specialty paper on which he has printed his silver gelatin images for years was discontinued when AGFA, a major producer of photographic supplies, stopped making it about a year ago.

"As soon as we found out, we got 300 sheets -- that was all we could find," said Lynne Stoddart, who works with Jack in the darkroom and hand-tints many of the images.

The paper begins to degenerate within two years of its manufacture date unless it's processed, and the Stoddarts have had the paper for a year now.

"One of our big questions is, do we go back and print a lot of our old negatives that we haven't printed in a long time to have a representation of what we've done over the last 35 years, or do we save that little bit of paper for new things?" said **Lynne Stoddart**.

Jack Stoddart liked the paper so well that he doesn't care to use any other.

"There are people still making black and white silver gelatin paper, but the paper we got from AGFA was an open fiber paper -- that's the important deal," he said. "The beauty of it is it accepts coating beautifully and oil and hand tinting. The tonal ranges and highlights were outstanding. It's hard to step back and work with a lesser paper."

Neither dying subjects nor dying media appear to be able to stop the Stoddarts from their pursuit of tradition and new -- or old -- ways of capturing it. Now they're producing documentary films that explore endangered people, places and art forms far and wide.

"We did the fishermen down in Panacea, Fla.," said Lynne Stoddart. "They're having a conflict with the government as far as the nets that they're allowed to use. And we did a piece on Celinda Pink, a blues singer in Nashville. Then we did a piece on the Cronk Gym closing in Detroit."

Most recently, the Stoddarts have started filming local musicians on a soundstage they've built on their property. The result: "Jammin' at Hippy Jack's," a series that airs on WCTE-TV. They're also busy planning a series of public concerts at their soundstage.

"We want to preserve the traditional music," said Jack Stoddart. "We're going to have regular music events where we'd like to have traditional Americana-jam-grass-blues, along with gourmet barbeque catered by Steve Gregory."

As for the still photography, Jack Stoddart is taking a step back.

"Everyone's going to super-technical digital cameras, so I'm going to go backwards and do pinhole photography," he said. "We may start making our own paper and working with more traditional types of photos."

He has also begun writing the stories of the people depicted in his original photographs and plans to compile them into a book.

Now that he's not traveling to art shows, he plans to keep his gallery open year-round to visitors.

"We want to have people come to us now," he said. "We're going to exhibit the entire collection of originals that's on display in the Tennessee State Museum, and also display fine crafts. Print a map and come. We welcome people to drop in anytime. We're open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. every day, seven days a week. We do encourage people to give us a call so we can put the dogs up, make the tea and put the cookies out."

For more information about Jack Stoddart's work or directions to the gallery, call (931)445-2072 or visit his Web site at www.jackstoddart.com.

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WEBSITE: Jack Stoddart Photography: <http://www.jackstoddart.com/index.html>

WCTE a local PBS affiliate has produced two documentaries (Snapshot: Life through the Lens of Jack Stoddart & Hippy Jack and Friends) about Jack and Lynne and their life's work.

Check your NPT and WCTE-TV channel guide for schedule. Upcoming dates/times:
January 3, 2007 9:30PM central - NPT will be airing Snapshot: Life through the Lens of Jack Stoddart

Snapshot: Life through the Lens of Jack Stoddart

Jack Stoddart is known throughout the world as a fine art photographer. In his series, "The Upper Cumberland Collection: The Plateau Years". This half hour documentary follows Jack sharing his work, visiting with his neighbors and tells what drew him from Miami to raise a family and establish a fine art gallery and studio in Crawford, TN.

Hippie Jack and Friends

In 1970, fine art photographer, Jack Stoddart moved from Miami to the Upper Cumberland Plateau during the height of the counter culture revolution to get back to the land. In this documentary, Jack revisits the site of the original commune, talks with his neighbors about their lives on the Plateau and their reaction to the hippies.

For programming information or to purchase a DVD of these documentaries please contact WCTE by phone 1-800-282-9283 or 931-528-2222 and <http://www.wcte.org>.

To visit Jack Stoddart Studios Photography & Craft Gallery from Cookeville, take I-40 East toward Crossville, Exit #300 to the left toward Monterey. At the second stop light, take a left onto Hwy. 84 toward Livingston. Go 7-8 miles and turn right on Dry Hollow Rd, after Livingston Quik Mart (red tin roof). Go 6-7 miles and take a left on Shiloh Rd. They are down this gravel road on the left about 2.5 miles. Look for a sign at the driveway. The Gallery address: 642 Shiloh Road Crawford, TN 38554

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PLATEAU STORIES
by writer and photographer
Jack Stoddart

CLAUDE RAMSEY

"The Wild Man of Highland Mountain"

The ponies were gone. Escaped in search of a better deal. No longer held captive by the wrong minded city hippies reading Mother Earth News. Their magazine money would have been better spent on some hay. They weren't my ponies, but I decided to go find them. I followed their tracks around the big bend in the road maybe a mile from our little camp. From there it was my decision to go farther away

from Nobody's Mountain. Why not? I was still living in a Disney movie. Every expedition was half acid trip, half history book. It was early enough on a warm day to take a walk and explore new territory. The little dirt road I traveled was barely more than a wide path. It took me in a wide arc around the mountain. At one point I passed old stone fences in the middle of the forest. Long abandoned little farms with only the fallen structures to hint at what once was a settlement of hill-folk's. I was getting the feeling that maybe in some awkward way these early Scottish settlers came here for the same reason I had. We were all running from something we couldn't control. The idea that we could move to a very poor area with a tiny population and somehow achieve a higher level of freedom must have been common to us both. Freedom is most relevant when you decide to do without. The less you need, the more freedom you can achieve. The ponies needed freedom, they didn't need us, after a while their tracks either disappeared or I forgot to look for them. Two or three miles later I noticed a small path that seemed to go back up over the mountain. Since I wasn't finding any ponies, not even their obvious pony tracks, I decided to walk the path back up. It was magic and scary to be in Tennessee traveling this plateau ridge with zero understanding of who or where I was. I had committed myself to a community of people living in a different time and place. I was living and walking in the most remote portion of this time travel.

Moving down a narrow deer path through monster hardwoods I discovered old, dead, hollow chestnut trees still able to stand. All the chestnut trees had died, the blight had come and killed them all. Those that died standing left trunks big enough for hunters to build fires and warm themselves. Many old hollow chestnut trees would be smoke stained and contain a fire pit. It was good shelter for those that hunted and drank after dark. The farther I walked up this path the nicer it got. Slowly climbing I was seeing different kinds of trees. No sign of human life. Not one old can, not one wrapper or cigarette filter, only trees, squirrels, birds and deer. I wasn't lost, I could have turned around and gone back the way I came. For some reason that didn't seem logical. What's the worst that could happen? There was plenty of water in the streams. The upward climb became a level path with a view of shadows growing longer off the huge red oak and poplar trees. It was also getting colder, a strange phenomena for someone born in the tropics. It slowly came to me that I was far from "Nobody's Mountain". If I turned around now it would be dark and cold as hell by the time I get back. Looking around for some mystic option I found a sign. Down below the ridge was smoke. Where there is smoke there is always someone. Heading straight down off the ridge, walking through big walnut, beech and ash, I come to an old chestnut rail fence in perfect shape. Not a piece out of place. An incredible antique wooden rail fence made from trees that would die and not rot. Two dogs were barking, I heard them before I saw them. He was right behind them wearing old overalls and a small felt hat. His feet were bare. He was a living ghost, it was *Deliverance* meets *Wayne's World*. I damn near bolted.

My natural reaction was to turn and haul my skinny little hippie ass back up that mountain as fast as last night's brown rice would take me. Against my instincts I stayed put. I held my ground in awe of this apparition. He called his dogs away from me and came to the fence. I stood on one side with my back to the big dark scary woods. He stood on the other side with his back to the past. Behind him was a perfect little frame

cabin, a traditional cabin with perfect stone fireplace and a small kitchen room in the back. No car no tractor no chainsaw. At this point my life was changed. At this exact moment when I stood face to face with Claude Ramsey I had a clear idea what I was going to do. This wasn't 1972 or even 1932. I had stumbled on someone living in 1860. Whatever it was that had chased me, or brought me here was telling me why. Now I knew. His face was thin with stubble, not a beard. His hair was cut, not very long, self-trimmed and rough. His two front teeth protruded a bit and were tobacco stained. He was tall enough and very thin. His eyes were a dark blue. I had long hair, I wore Levis, a t-shirt and an army surplus jacket. On my head I wore an old green army hat. I was a 1972 drop out, he was an 1860 holdover. I told him my name. I told him I was looking for some ponies. He said he hadn't seen them. He said his name was Claude and he invited me to his house to warm by the fire. I climbed over the fence and we walked with the dogs about fifty yards to the cabin. The door was left cracked open, he never closed it all the way. Inside was the sleeping and living area containing two common beds with big stuffed mattresses covered by old quilts. The small back kitchen room had a "Never Fail" cook stove and a primitive table. Cast iron skillets and wash pans hung on the wall. There was a flintlock over the front door. We sat in common chairs by the fire. He leaned back on two legs and listened intently while I told him my story.

I told him of Miami and Boston. I told him about running around with crazed college-hippie-revolutionaries from Northeastern University. I told him how we got assed whipped by Boston's riot police. I told him that a house cost \$250,000 in south Florida. I was confessing to the high priest of country living. He didn't shoot me. He invited me to "stay all night". I settled on directions, a more direct way back to my camp and future wife and the V.W. bus with a dog and two cat's. I learned from Clarence that Claude was the "Wild Man" of Highland Mountain. He had been in a car only once in his life. Only when he got his draft notice for WW2 and they had come from the county seat to take him for induction did he first set foot in an automobile. Halfway through the twenty mile trip to town Claude jumped out and ran for home. I wondered how lost he must have been trying to find his way back to Highland Mountain. I imagined he was hard to find for some time after that. Easier to slip into the woods and hide whenever the dogs sounded the alarm. Some well placed folks from town that knew Claude's story wrote letters to the Federal government that resulted in a direct pardon from service. Claude received a letter from F.D.R.'s desk giving him a pass. He was no Alvin C. York, putting him in the army would be like torture to a man living in the past. For once the government got it right, even a blind pig finds an acorn now and then. I learned from Clarence that Claude had lived with his mother and father in the small mountain community that just slowly disappeared. The old ones passed away and the young ones moved away to work in the factory for not too much but just enough. First Claude's father died and then his mother who had taught him to read was gone. He was a grown man living in the past on a small farm. Clarence told me that Claude hid from most people. He was shy and would go to the woods until the rare visitor went away. Clarence told me it was odd that he came out to see me by the fence, and unusual that he invited me to the house. He didn't really try to talk me out of going back. He couldn't have, I'm sure he knew it. When I went back, I went straight over the mountain at Ravens Bluff and then to the small path that lead to Claude's place. As I climbed over the perfect fence he sat on the porch waiting for me.

His dogs remained quiet by his side. It was his turn to talk, and he did so as if something had come loose in him. He asked about the war in Viet Nam and airplanes dropping bombs and fire from the sky. He pointed to planes flying above us. He did not like them. Claude had a tiny little transistor radio that Bigfoot from the hardware store had brought him. This was 1860 with a twist.

Claude knew what was going on. He wanted to talk about the environment. Of course he did not call it that. He told me how the trees were changing, and the air. He told how the seasons had changed. He told of yellow root growing too early and of animals he no longer saw. Claude blamed it all on the "infernal combustion engine". He nailed it, hit it right on the head. There I was sitting on the porch of a penniless authentic hill person who still cut his yard with a hand scythe and gathered his food in the woods. He explained in 1972 exactly what scientist would be saying 34 years and billions spent later. "You don't need a weatherman to see which way the wind blows". The Weathermen I knew in Boston didn't know shit about the weather. I asked if I could use my camera. He wanted to know why. I told him it was important to save pictures of the way he lived, that he was the last one really living this way. Even though Bigfoot brought him the radio and sometimes a newspaper that he was the man left behind. He was cool with it and so my documentation of rural Tennessee started. First I walked back to the place at the fence where I first met him. That was the first view I wanted of his neat little paradise. I wanted to be close enough to see the rough ladder and hand tools leaning on the stone chimney. I wanted to see the two common chairs on the porch, I wanted to see the wash basin sitting on the tiny rough board table attached to the back kitchen door. The pear tree in front and the fenced in garden completed the framing of the shot. That was the first image. Then I photographed the perfect little smokehouse, log with silver shake roof nestled in thick fescue grass. The barn in the lower field, all logs so clean and neat. Inside the cabin it was dark. I had no tri-pod, just one Cannon 35mm S.L.R. I only had one roll of tri-x 400 speed black and white film. I photographed the beds, the small dresser complete with oil lamp and cigar box. I photographed the "Never Fail" wood cook-stove flanked by skillets on the wall. Finally back outside I photographed Claude by the spring in his overalls, shirt and felt hat. He had no shoes on his feet. This was the first of many return visits to Claude Ramsey's. Sometimes I would bring other freaks or hippies to visit. He seemed to enjoy people from away.

Our first little farm was 48 acres with an old cabin, barn and outhouse located at the foot of Highland Mountain. In a strange way this was Claude's turf. Claude would walk off the mountain past Cecil Speck's hardwood farm and across Leland Allred's cleared cow pastures. He would scamper across the state road to the safety of Copeland's store. Our cabin was also walking distance from the store, but mostly we drove there. The kids were small but too heavy to carry being breast fed and all. Mrs. Copeland treated him with great care and respect. She had known his parents and his neighbors who were gone to work for just enough. She had known Claude all his life. Whenever he came to the store she deferred to him as if he were rural royalty.

We lived 4 years in this little community. Babies were born, cows were milked and winter's were spent cooking and heating over the same fire. I worked in a sawmill and

then for a large animal vet. All the while I took black and white pictures when I could, when I had film. The sawmill paid \$68 a week, the vet paid minimum as well but worked more hours. Working for Dr. Easterly I met every old person with a mule or a cow in the county. Soon I was "Doc's Hippie" and I could go anywhere I wished and gain access with my camera. None of them were Claude. They were beautiful, simple, whiskey making, shirt factory working, hog killing, hillbilly's. Claude remained the only one so pure as to be a living museum. In 1976 we sold our first place for \$14,000 and moved to the West Fork River area of Overton County. The new place had a big pre-civil war house and a huge spring running out of the mountain. I had water enough for print-making. For the first time I could work at home on the negatives I had created for the last 4 years. The first ones I worked on were Claude's. "The Hermit's House", "The Cookstove", "The Smokehouse", "Claude's Barn", and "Claude Ramsey" himself. By the time I got word that Claude was sick human services knew it as well. They had been out to see him, but he wasn't there. I could just see him hiding in his hardwood forest of elms, gum and dogwood. He been tricked by the town folks before and he wasn't falling for it again. I contacted my friend Dr. Katherine Wolf to go check him out. Perry White, who'd named his daughter Martha White after the flour, drove us as close as possible in his big four wheel drive pick up truck. We walked the rest of the way. I carried Dr Wolf over the fence, she'd been sick herself and wasn't in fence climbing shape. Claude was on the porch grabbing his dogs. He always put them up if a woman came. He had a large tumor on his hand. He claimed it came from the place where he'd been snake bit so many years before. Dr. Wolf examined him and dressed the open sore. He was like a child with a mother. She explained to him that if he didn't go to the hospital he would die. He didn't want to go. He knew he was bad. He wanted to stay. We left him. I think I was too young to deal with it, too immature and damaged to appreciate life. I wanted him to have free will, to be allowed to choose his own fate. Another time I might have tried to force him. Either way was bad. About a month later I got the call. Jesse Dixon had been checking on Claude. Driving his old log truck out to see him, taking him firewood. The last time Jesse went Claude was down on the floor in front of the fireplace. He was too weak to get up. Jesse carried him to the log truck and took him to Lady Ann Memorial Hospital in the same county seat that had failed to induct him for WW2. He'd finally made it all the way to town. Lady Ann sounds Catholic but it was just a small local hospital staffed by sweet nurses from the community. Everyone was almost certainly Baptist or Church of Christ. When I got there it was late afternoon. My first stop was the nurse's station to make sure they knew who Claude was. Then to see happily wearing his backless hospital gown. His hand was perfectly bandaged and he'd been neatly shaved.

We talked and he seemed content. It struck me that I should have had him here a month ago, or a year. He told me they wanted to take his hand off, that they wanted permission. He didn't want the surgery. He never asked what I thought. He'd told them no. It was all too sad, more than I could handle. I noticed the T.V. over his bed and I asked him if he wanted to watch it. I knew he'd heard about television.. He said he would like to "see it work". Big bird appeared on the screen, Sesame Street. He absolutely loved it. There I left him. All I could think of was out. The walls were squeezing in on me. Even a fake Catholic hospital staffed by Baptists and Church of Christ nurses was too much for me. Claude showed them all and died that night. He'd had enough of this world and was ready

for the next. It surprised everyone except him. When his long lost relatives came to sell his few possessions, I arranged for a friend to go on my behalf and purchase the "Never-Fail" stove for \$55. I could never have faced Claude's "estate" sale. The stove remains the same, still full of Claude's magic backwoods mojo. Some bookish hippies bought his place. I've never been back.

STODDART GALLERY PLANS OPEN HOUSE

CRAWFORD -- Jack Stoddart Photography & Craft Gallery will host its Fourth Annual Open House Nov. 17-19 from 10 a.m.-8 p.m. each day.

This year's event will focus on traditional fine art crafts including clay, wood, glass, jewelry, clothing, sculpture and more.

The Stoddart photography exhibit will feature images recently acquired by the Tennessee State Museum for permanent display and soon to be included in the Museum of American History at the Smithsonian. Lois Riggins-Ezell, director of the Tennessee State Museum, has said she considers the "Plateau Collection" of images to be definitive, a true inside perspective of a now vanished culture of people.

Throughout the weekend there will be live demonstrations by renowned folk artist "The Bucket Man." Gourmet brisket, pulled pork and ribs from award-winning Light My Fire BBQ will be smoked on site.

Bring your chairs or blankets for three days of live music on the new Sundown Stage featuring Warren Gently and a return performance by The Ballingers. Camera crews will be on hand to document this event for rebroadcast on local PBS affiliate WCTE.

Jack Stoddart Photography & Craft Gallery is located directly in between Cookeville and Crossville, 20 minutes off I-40 at exit #300.

Exit toward Monterey. At the second stop light, turn left onto Hwy. 84 toward Livingston. Go seven to eight miles and turn right on Dry Hollow Rd. after Livingston Quik Mart (red tin roof). Go six to seven miles and turn left on Shiloh Rd.

They are down this gravel road on the left about 2.5 miles. Look for a sign at the driveway. The gallery address is 642 Shiloh Road, Crawford, TN 38554

For music schedule and printable map, call (931)445-2072 or visit www.jackstoddart.com.

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NATIONALLY ACCLAIMED LOCAL ARTIST TO EXHIBIT COLLECTIONS OF FINE ART PHOTOS

After 30 years of traveling to art shows across the country, local artist Jack Stoddart is scheduled to hold a three-day open house Friday through Sunday, Dec. 5-7, from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. at his private gallery studio on his property in the West Fork community of Overton County.

This will be the first opportunity for area residents to view a body of work considered a mainstay by many collectors of traditional fine art photography.

On exhibit will be images that span 30 years of traditional silver gelatin printmaking and will include for the first time "Old Guys I've Known," a group of images that have resurfaced from his earliest years on the Cumberland Plateau.

This series of images was created in the early 1970s of Overton County residents Leland Allred, Claude Ramsey, Cleedy Conatser, Claude Webb, Clarence Hammock, Alex Hammock, R.H. Ledbetter, Elmer Tinch, Jack Bilbrey, Lamar Lacy and many more. This will be the first exhibition of this series, scheduled to travel, beginning in 2004.

In addition, the second printing of the entire "Plateau Collection," consisting of 15 sepia-toned, silver gelatin images, created on the Cumberland Plateau during the 1970s, will hang for the duration of the open house. The first printing was recently acquired by The Morris Museum in Augusta, Ga., and is scheduled to go on display August 2004.

In order to support his growing family, Stoddart worked for several years in the early 1970s in a sawmill, making hickory axe handles, and later for a large animal veterinarian. He still managed to make time to begin a career of photographing a disappearing culture.

While living in a primitive log cabin with no running water, Stoddart rented the former women's public restroom below Vasco Bilbrey's Grocery on the square in Livingston. Here, he spent many evenings processing film and printing the early silver gelatin images that would become a mainstay of his future exhibits.

Often, it would just be Stoddart, a street sweeper and his dog alone on the square in the evening. Stoddart spent these evenings chronicling the last vestiges of an agrarian lifestyle that still existed in rural north central Tennessee.

Stoddart's most recent series, "Down East," has been created from multiple trips to the Northeast. Shooting pictures from Maine to Nova Scotia, he has created a new portfolio that reflects the working harbors and traditional lifestyles of yet another timeless culture. With this series, the focus is on the sea, reflecting history through art.

A full-time artist since 1975, Stoddart is a veteran of hundreds of retail art shows. His museum collections across the country now include examples of his elegant imagery, a tribute to a life dedicated to a traditional style of fine art photography.

Individual pieces will be available for purchase during the exhibit. For more information, call (800)947-3315, ext. 33 or visit www.jackstoddart.com.

Directions: Jack Stoddart's Studio is located 80 miles east of Nashville in Overton County. From Nashville, take I-40 exit 300 (Monterey) and turn left. At the second stop light, take a left towards Livingston (Hwy. 84). Continue down the mountain for 6-8 miles. Turn right after Livingston Quik Market gas station (red tin roof) onto Dry Hollow Road. Go approximately 6-7 miles until a white sign appears for Three Forks Missionary Baptist Church, turn left at first road, Shiloh Road. (There is a cave on the right and a log house on the left.) This is a two-way gravel road. Continue for about 2.5 miles. The farm is on the left past the covered bridge. Park in the gravel lot beside the blue building with the purple roof.

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<http://www.ajlambert.com>