

Building the Meditation Center

Henry and Mary Cushing Niles, Quakers from Baltimore, had by 1970 or thereabout purchased, during a time-period of several decades, over 1700 acres of beautiful forested land in West Virginia. It was located about 50 miles from Washington, D.C. in an area between the Appalachian Trail on top of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Shenandoah River in the valley to the West. Picture a map having the Blue Ridge mountaintops and the Appalachian Trail running across the top, and the Shenandoah River running parallel at the bottom. Between, on several miles of the forested mountainside slopes would be the Rolling Ridge land. It would have three exceptionally interesting landmarks: the Devil's Racetrack, a creek bed filled with huge, rounded stones from the age of glaciers; a magnificent set of waterfalls; and nearby, just off the Appalachian trail, a mountain top overlook to view the Shenandoah Valley and the mountain valleys leading up to it. In the forested area there are remains of an old nineteenth century farm community, including a small network of dirt roads a few of which, such as "Grand Boulevard", have been restored for four-wheel drive vehicles. Old timber roads, now little more than pathways, traverse some parts of the higher elevations.

The Niles indicated to friends that they wanted to transfer ownership of a major tract of that area to a foundation they were setting up what would be called the Rolling Ridge Foundation. The Foundation would provide long-term, renewable leases of land to charitable groups. These organizations would provide a plan for programs and structures that would have the effect of providing a perpetual spiritual use of the land.

Several of these Niles' friends were Quakers who interested Friends from the Langley Hill, VA, Washington, D.C. and Bethesda, MD Friends meetings to organize around the plan for a nature center. It came to be known as the Friends Wilderness Meditation Center

(FWMC) but is now using the name of Friends Wilderness Center. The group was all volunteers. Membership dues were agreed on to provide for funds. Discussion of non-profit status led to finding or developing the necessary paperwork and successfully filing with the IRS. The objectives for the center emerged after considerable discussion. Programs centering on nature and world religions would be held regularly in the spring, summer, and fall. There would be hikes along the miles of trails and abandoned roads to explore nature in the area, search for wild flowers, study the Appalachian geology, and last but not least, find an ideal location for a Meditation Center building. Now, with the former cabin of Henry and Mary Cushing Niles available year round, winter stay-overs, programs, and landscape are equally available.

The location for the meditation center needed to be one of exceptional natural beauty, yet be accessible for the transport of building materials, have a spring and a stream nearby and have an improvable woods road with a place for parking within walking distance. The search was futile for some months until several of the searchers, being tired after a mountain climb, noticed a patch of grass in a lower-mountainside clearing between the trees. They walked from the ridge road they were on to the area and rested. Then they left. Later they recalled their enjoyment and realized that the location met the other needs. In the following weeks everyone possible visited the site and agreed it should be the site for the meditation center, now called, for short, the “tree house.” Thereafter, a 40 year lease was drawn up with the Rolling Ridge foundation for 40 acres on which buildings could be located, including the Meditation Center area. There was unlimited access to the remaining large acreage held by the Rolling Ridge Foundation.

Meetings of the group began centering on the design of a meditation center. One of the members, married to an oriental wife, had, in respect for her traditions, recently completed in his wooded

backyard, a retreat house having Japanese architecture. It was set on stilts at the treetop level and had a large roof that sloped upwards toward the sky. Members of FWMC visited his project and were delighted with its uniqueness and its fit to a natural setting. He volunteered to design a similar building for the Meditation Center site. This was eagerly accepted. As the design progressed it included putting the building floor about 12 feet off the ground with large telephone poles for support; a circular stairway from ground to platform; a rear porch which surrounded the trunk of a large living tree (later lost to a Gypsy Moth infestation); meditation alcoves on two sides; and, of course, a long sloping roof that reached for the sky. The roof soared to 30 feet above the ground. It was supported by steel guy-wires for stability in the mountainside wind. The platform was at the level of the small treetops, so one could at times see into the distance to the Shenandoah Valley. The Meditation Center platform was large enough to be comfortable for a circle of thirty people, and it would accommodate a dozen sleeping bags. Sidewalls and windows were considered, but because the structure needed to be flexible, the idea was not acted upon, in favor of open sidewall framework. That had the considerable advantage of permitting the summer mountain breezes to flow naturally and coolly across the platform.

It was necessary to locate and build an outhouse as well. When obtaining building permits, we at first were told an old-fashioned outhouse wouldn't be allowed. However, when it became clear that the building site would not have electric power from outside, permission was granted. When we dug the outhouse, trying for eight feet deep, we were stymied to run into what seemed to be a solid mass of rock about four feet deep. We dug about and used long steel digging bars until nearly exhausted. After several days we were giving up hope and thought we would need to find another building site, in effect starting over. While some of us went to lunch, our oldest volunteer, a man of 72 years, stayed back. About half-an-hour later he appeared and said he discovered we could dig out a

large rock. He had persevered. We removed the rock and were able to carve out the space for the outhouse.

When construction on the meditation center began, it started with ordering the lumber from a West Virginia lumber company. The challenge was to traverse old, overgrown logging trails with a large lumber truck. The last quarter mile was up a steep and rutted road that led up the mountain. To our good fortune they accepted the challenge, and with the help of four-wheel drive delivered most of the fairly-large quantity of lumber to the site. However, on a second trip the side view mirror was ripped off the truck. Thereafter, they would only agree to deliver the remaining large roof rafters to a place almost a mile from the building site. Two volunteers undertook to carry these rafters one by one to the destination. It took two days.

Pressure treated wood was not available in 1975. The building was definitely exposed to the weather. A plan to use waterproofing every year or two for all exposed areas was put in operation. By and large this program can be considered a 35 year success. Carpenter bees are another problem. They drill into wooden planks and weaken them. Fortunately, almost all such damage is done to planks with an exterior exposure. A yearly inspection, spraying with a deterrent, and plugging entrances slows the problem. Beyond that, planks that are damaged are taken down and replaced. The wilderness center has consulted architects or structural engineers on three occasions to insure the safety of the structure. One result was a third row of creosoted, insect proof telephone poles beneath the structure. The building is currently and has always been evaluated as safe.

FWMC members volunteered to encamp at the site as schedules permitted and be the construction crew. A portable generator was purchased and fastened to wooden skids so it could be dragged and carried to the site. Gasoline was also carried in. Construction

began by digging holes for the telephone poles that would support the building. With Herculean effort the heavy posts were raised to vertical in their holes. One of our group was an engineer. He developed equations for each pole that considered the depth of the hole, the slant of the land and the distance the pole would ascend. When the poles were cut and placed in the holes the tops were exactly level when we attached the first floor joists. This was a good beginning. We rapidly put in floor supports then plywood flooring. After days of labor we saw the meditation platform sitting at the small treetop level.

We had an encampment of tents surrounding a central campfire and grill. With bricks and stones we had built a spit suitable for roasting corn and potatoes and grilling hot dogs and hamburgers. We sat on logs around the fire at night in this clearing, hearing the whippoorwills and cicada, and looking up at a multitude of stars. Our vision of a wilderness meditation center seemed closer. One night after everyone was asleep there was a blood-curdling scream that continued and grew louder. A woman in the tent nearest the noise coming from the dark woods cried out for help. One gentleman left the safety of his tent and went to her aid. Suddenly the screaming stopped. We assumed later that we had been in the company of a wild cat. The wilderness can be frightening, although that was the only such incident in 35 years of outdoor camping there. Everyone has fond memories of the fellowship at those encampments.

Volunteering to build usually also means learning to use the tools and adapt to new challenges. Our volunteers, and a few daredevils including a woman who led the way to working on roof panels at the 30' level, learned to hammer nails, sit out on uncovered floor joists high above the ground, even sit on roof rafters up to 30 feet above the ground while nailing on the roof. There was a feeling of satisfaction in meeting these challenges. The volunteers found a place deep enough to bathe in a nearby stream. They blazed a trail

down the hillside to that location. The spring for drinking water, whose exact location was at first unknown, was found. A shovel brigade dug it out and lined it with stones. A turning circle was cleared for vehicles on the road at the bottom of the steep hill below the meditation center. A major frustration occurred on the occasion when the announcement for a weekend of work went out but forgot to tell people to bring hammers. Only a few hammers were available when approximately twenty people came without them.

The meditation center took two calendar years to build given the volunteer time that was available. The second summer was devoted to building a circular stairway to the back –porch platform about 12 feet above the ground. It was a Forest Service design and involved long triangular cuts in the porch boards, fastening the inside of each board with a metal rod that spanned the height of 12 feet. Other tasks involved building perimeter and porch railings, and work in the woods around the meditation center, labeling trails and roads with signs so people would not lose their way. Several times people were lost for several hours then found. Follow those paths that lead toward the river is good advice.

As the meditation center became useable, the FWMC began planning meetings for the center on nature, meditation, and world religions. Representatives of these religions and naturalists enjoyed coming to the wilderness, or so we called it, although not comparable in magnitude to wilderness areas to be found in less populated areas. Individuals planned stays ranging from overnight to a week in length. Some stayed in their tents, some slept on the deck of the meditation center. Later, a circular yurt was built which enclosed people from heavy weather and provided indoor sleeping space on a carpet with a thick foam-rubber pad beneath. Still later the Niles cabin with modern conveniences became available for visitors and sojourners. Along with other organizations with long-term leases from the Rolling Ridge Foundation, the Friends Wilderness Meditation Center is helping to realize the vision of

**Henry and Mary Cushing Niles for the continued spiritual use of
this great natural area.**

Rod Pelton, May 2010