



MYSTERY OF CLOVER HILL

Child's remains found in attic of historic home

BY JOHN McCASLIN *Rappahannock News staff*

Attics are like graveyards, where sentimental treasures are placed in boxes and plastic bags and shoved into dark corners, allowing the pain of parting to be postponed for another day. Photo albums and love letters, comic books and cowboy boots, tea sets and violins — all better forgotten for future generations to brush aside the dust and deal with.

Most attic stashes consist of the

typical family clutter. Some prove valuable if not historic. Then there are those rare finds beneath the rafters and cobwebs that are downright shocking and creepy. As was the case this past year in the musty attic of Clover Hill on Sperryville Pike, where Eldon Farms' longtime herdsman Rich Bradley stumbled upon the

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'Your heart rate goes up, and you immediately start thinking why is this here? What happened?'

MYSTERY OF CLOVER HILL



Human skeletal remains were discovered last year in the attic of historic Clover Hill, just outside Woodville.

BY JOHN MCCASLIN

MYSTERY

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skull and other remains of an infant child wrapped in a cloth.

“This case involves human infant skeletal remains found in a cardboard box in the attic of a historic house at 4432 Sperryville Pike, in Rappahannock County, VA.,” Smithsonian Institution Museum of Natural History Physical Anthropologist Dr. David R. Hunt wrote in his report of Jan. 20, 2019, sent to Dr. Meghan Kessler, assistant chief medical examiner of the Virginia Department of Health’s northern district in Manassas.

“The partial remains are of an infant of 6 to 10 months in age,” Dr. Hunt determined. “Most of the skeleton has been destroyed or heavily damaged by rodent predation. The remains... indicate the infant in the box is historic, likely from the era previous to or into WWII.”

Bradley, who for two-plus decades has been a key member of Eldon’s 7,100-acre cattle operation, was leading a home restoration expert through Clover Hill last year when in a dark and dingy passageway connecting the front and back portions of the attic his flashlight captured something unusual inside a long box.

Curious, Bradley knelt to his knees, picked up what he thought was a plastic object, and a look of astonishment crossed his face.

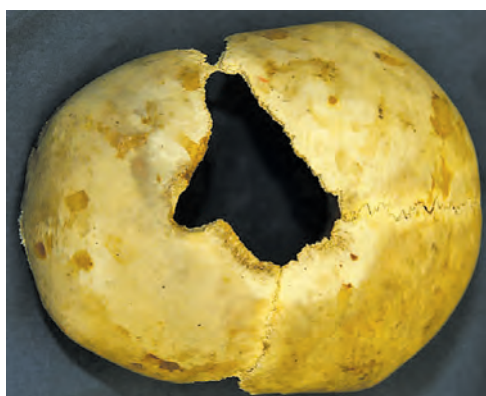
“This is a skull!” he exclaimed.

His mind “now racing,” Bradley dug deeper into two smaller boxes placed inside the larger box, spotting what appeared to be “finger bones and a couple of molars. And I thought, ‘This is getting weird.’”

“Your heart rate goes up, and you immediately start thinking, ‘Why is this here? What happened?’”

Bradley told the Rappahannock News. “It was spooky. It was hard to sleep — your brain is going through every crime show you’ve ever seen.”

The Smithsonian anthropologist was brought into the case on March 29, 2018, asked to examine photographs supplied by the Rappahannock County Sheriff’s Office “of a cranium that was found in a box in the attic” of the 18th century federal-style home north of Woodville, which became part of Eldon Farms in the 1960s. The



COURTESY PHOTO

The cranium of the child was “significantly damaged by rodent predation,” thus the cause of death couldn’t be determined.

landmark house, with its sweeping portico and majestic white columns, remains under renovation.

“I made arrangements to review these remains, cloth and box at the Northern Virginia morgue on Sunday April 8, 2018,” Dr. Hunt wrote of his examination. “In the assessment of this case, Rappahannock County Sheriff’s Department Investigator Jim Jones was present and contributed to the assessment of the external

box and two internal boxes, the removal of the cloth wrappings, and sorting through the remnant materials (rodent nests made of plant materials and leaves, rodent feces, pieces of newspaper, insect parts and seed shells)... to retrieve the bone fragments and dentition.”

The scientist described the large external box (all the boxes, he said, were “vintage” and of color reflecting “long-term environmental effects being in an attic”) as rectangular, with the labeling “Riverton Lime and Stone Co., Inc., Riverton, Va.,” active in production from the 1920’s into the early 1940’s, with the additional wording “Rock Wool Bats, 12-in. x 15 in. bats, wall thick, 20 sq. ft.”

Inside the rectangular box was a hard flat cardboard piece with staples along the midline, which was the lid to the next largest box constructed of hard-pressed pulp cardboard. On the outside were two stamps: side views of Benjamin Franklin — 50 cents and 20 cents — with a Philadelphia cancellation stamp.

“These two stamps are the Washington-Franklin series, spanning 1908–1923... printed from 1914–1920,” Dr. Hunt noted.

Adjacent to the stamps was a label identifying the original contents as “wallpaper rolls.” Also scribbled on the box were grease-pencil shipping notes.

“Inside this larger box was the cranium and the cloth wrapping,” Dr. Hunt continued. “The smaller box was a corrugated cardboard box which only had bits of newspaper, eaten seed shells, dead insect parts and rodent feces. On the outside of this box was [a] ‘Glass, Handle with Care’ label and a Postal Service metered postage stamp with a date of xx-8-19x2.”

“This meter stamp was first produced in 1931 using a National Cash Register meter model P-1924. The meter stamp in this case would be the second series started in 1932. There was one scrap of newspaper that a date could be partially identified — August 31, 192x.”

➔ Finally, the cloth wrapped around the infant was “cotton” or “linen loose weave” material, he said. “Being that it was assumed to have been in the boxes in the attic, the breakdown of the cloth would suggest greater than 50 years,” Dr. Hunt wrote. “The staining on the cloth identifies that the body had decomposed and desiccated in this cloth, the locations being in three parts of the cloth from the decomposition materials being absorbed as they leached out to the cloth.”

“The cloth is also interesting in its dimensions,” he said. “The length is over 7 ft and narrow, about 4 ft and the edging all around is stitched. This shape is not what would be expected of a regular blanket/throw or a baby blanket. Speculatively, the shape appears to be like a base liner for a coffin. If the deceased baby had gone to a mortician being released from a hospital, they may have wrapped the body in this cloth.”

In addition, there was “one small button” found in the box.

Dr. Hunt determined the skeletal remains were of “one individual” — an infant approximately 8 months old, give or take 3 months. There was no question that the body “had been wrapped in a large linen or cotton cloth and placed in a cardboard box and put into a larger cardboard box.”

As for the specific skeletal elements, the anthropologist said the cranium was “significantly damaged by rodent predation,” as were other bone fragments, several of which he identified individually.

For example, both the right and left mandibular corpus, which supports the teeth, were present, with crypts for medial and lateral incisors and canines. But “most all elements are chewed and/or destroyed by rodent predation,” he observed.

The sex of the infant, Dr. Hunt determined, could not be positively established without further study: “Impossible to identify from infant skeleton. DNA analysis for sex chromosomes would have to be done.”

That said, he took measurements of the head’s circumference as it relates to tissue thickness, comparing it to living boys and girls, but he did not go so far as to suggest its sex in his report.

Similarly, the “ancestry” was also indeterminate, he said — short of future DNA tests conducted with potential relatives who might be willing to participate.

“The skeletal remains do have a small amount of desiccated tissue, mostly seen on the cranial elements,” Dr. Hunt confirmed. “The bones are mostly fragmentary due to the rodent predation on the bone. These features (along with the stains on the cloth) suggest that the body had enough time to decompose and dehydrate before any predation, and this was only done by small rodents (such as mice).”

“Many rodents are particular about the state of the bone and tissue

Smithsonian: “This case involves human infant skeletal remains found in a cardboard box in the attic of a historic house at 4432 Sperryville Pike, in Rappahannock County, VA.”

elements that they will feed on. Rats are more prone to wet tissue and bone that still has fatty material inside. Whereas mice and squirrels only predate on dry bone and will not be interested in soft tissue. The gnawing marks and the feces in the boxes reflect small rodents — such as mice.”



COURTESY PHOTOS

The cloth in which the child was wrapped is unusual in that it measured 7 feet in length.

As for how the infant died, Dr. Hunt said there were “no observable traumatic defects observed.” However, he stressed that the “level of rodent predation of the elements severely limited trauma analysis.”

And finally, this important conclusion: “Time Since Death: Pre-World War II time period 1930’s — early 1940’s.”



This rectangular cardboard box, examined here at the Northern Virginia morgue, held two inner boxes.

Locally, very few outside of Eldon Farms and the Rappahannock Sheriff’s Office discussed the discovery of the remains. Earlier this year, Washington private attorney Michael Brown of Walker Jones PC forwarded Dr. Hunt’s findings to Art Schiller, legal representative for the Lane family, who are the owners of Eldon Farms.

“Please find attached a copy of the medical examiner’s office report related to the infant remains discovered at the farm,” Brown wrote to Schiller. “The [Rappahannock] Sheriff’s Office have closed their file. The only remaining question is whether Lane as the property owners wants to take receipt of the remains for proper disposition, or would rather have them turned over to the Smithsonian (who would take them in this instance).”

“Let me know your preference as to how to proceed.”

John Genho, longtime manager of Eldon Farms, can only speculate

how the human remains came to be in the attic of the house, where he and his wife, Lynn, and their five children lived for a decade until just a few years ago. It is his understanding that more than one family lived in the home during the first half of the 20th century until its purchase by Eldon Farms. It was confirmed that one such family was told about the discovery, however they reportedly had no knowledge of the child.

That said, the family, who for privacy reasons won’t be identified by this newspaper, is said to be “intrigued” by the find. One family member did not respond to a request for an interview.

“I raised five babies in that house!” said Lynn Genho, noting her family went into the attic on numerous occasions. But never did they closely

inspect the darkened catwalk space leading to the oldest section of the house, which dates to the 1780s. It was there, between the floor joists, that the remains were found.

Bradley has his own theories of why the remains were tucked into ordinary boxes and slid into an isolated pocket of the attic, one being “a mother who lost her child, and couldn’t let it go.” Or maybe “the ground was frozen” and the corpse couldn’t — and in time wouldn’t — be buried. Why reopen old wounds?

John Genho said the mystery child’s remains are still in possession of the Smithsonian, although as Brown pointed out it’s up to Eldon Farms to decide whether to have them returned to Rappahannock County. Given her preference, and barring DNA testing that could still be requested by potential relatives, Lynn would like to see the remains brought back to Clover Hill’s private cemetery for a proper burial.

“That’s what I would like to see happen,” she said.

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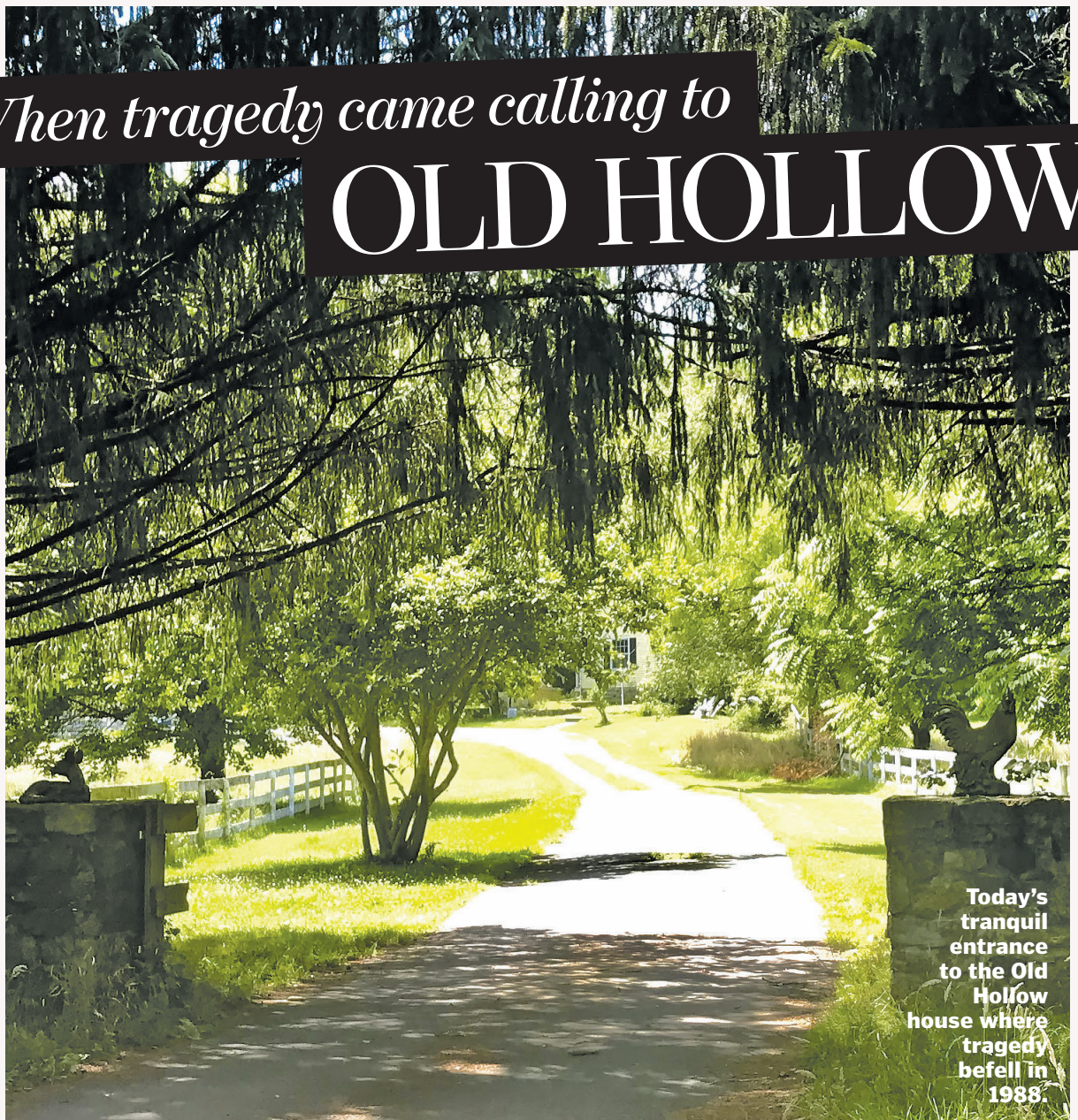
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When tragedy came calling to

OLD HOLLOW



Today's tranquil entrance to the Old Hollow house where tragedy befell in 1988.

BY JOHN MCCASLIN

Gary Noesner, founding chief of the FBI Crisis Negotiation Unit, was dispatched in the dark of the night to otherwise sleepy Sperryville.



The FBI chief hostage negotiator's phone rang in the middle of the night, telling him to hightail it to Sperryville

BY JOHN MCCASLIN • *Rappahannock News staff*

Mention Sperryville and people picture panoramic views and fruit stands, distilleries and art studios, a gateway to Shenandoah National Park and Skyline Drive. For the nation's top hostage negotiators Sperryville is an entirely different study.

When Gary Noesner's phone rang in the middle of the night on April 9,

1988, telling him to hightail it to rural Sperryville, Virginia, the FBI hostage negotiator didn't need a road map. As he recalls in an interview with the Rappahannock News, he'd been in Sperryville only months before picking apples with his family.

The veteran FBI agent, working out of the bureau's Washington Field Office,

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Seven-year-old Eleanor Gallagher of Stafford didn't let Thursday's sweltering heat and humidity keep her from trying out numerous antique farm tractors of every size and color on display at the 13th Annual Rappahannock County 4th of July Celebration at Ben Venue Farms. Not surprisingly, Eleanor picked this pink Case tractor (c. 1948) painted pink as her favorite, although she said she also likes her dad's more conventional tractor. ▶ **More surrounding this year's Independence Day celebration, organized by the Sperryville Volunteer Fire Department, is found on page 6**

Giving Roy Sullivan his due — and distance

**Shenandoah
recalls park
ranger struck
seven times by
lightning**

BY JOHN McCASLIN
Rappahannock News staff

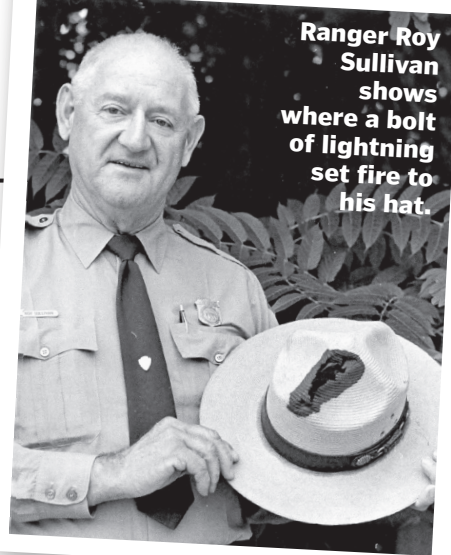
When rangers hear the clap of thunder in Shenandoah National Park they take it seriously. And for good reason.

“Roy Sullivan was a park ranger at Shenandoah National Park,” park officials educate visitors as lightning season shifts into high gear. “On seven occasions

between 1942 and 1977, Ranger Sullivan was struck by lightning and lived to tell about it. Please be safe and stop all outdoor activities when you hear thunder.”

It's not every Shenandoah Park ranger born more than a hundred years ago who is so revered today — or at least comes to

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Ranger Roy Sullivan shows where a bolt of lightning set fire to his hat.

LIGHTNING

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mind every time a thunderstorm brews above Skyline Drive.

For Roy, it wasn't easy being a "Spark Ranger." After lightning found him more than once some people purposely avoided the "Human Lightning Conductor" (another of his nicknames), fearful that the electrical current that so many times passed through him would similarly consume them.

As Roy once recalled, "I was walking with the Chief Ranger one day when lightning struck way off (in the distance). The Chief said, 'I'll see you later.'"

Robert Jacobsen, who served as Shenandoah's Park Superintendent from 1972 to 1986, recalled: "A long standing rule in the park was that if you see a dark cloud heading your way — get away from Roy Sullivan."

Born in Greene County in 1912, Sullivan began his career as a National Park Service ranger in 1936, literally weeks after Shenandoah's boundaries were created. Never then did he think that by simply going about his ranger duties he would land in the Guinness Book of World Records — and his two charred hats in Guinness World Exhibit Halls.

Guinness certified that Sullivan was struck by lightning more times than any other human being in history. As to how — and why — there are no concrete scientific answers. For Roy, it reached a point where he actually believed menacing storm clouds, for whatever inexplicable reasons, were purposely following him.

An average of 51 Americans are struck and killed by lightning every year. Many others get struck and live to tell about it. The first recorded lightning strike for the Shenandoah ranger occurred in April 1942, after he had taken cover in a new fire lookout tower yet to be fitted with lightning rods.

Roy said the tower in which he huddled was struck eight times that day, with flames "jumping" all over the place. Rather than burning to death inside, he fled outdoors, only to be struck by a thunderbolt that scorched his right leg, knocked off his big toenail, and burned a hole in his shoe.

The ranger would recall that harrowing lightning strike for the next quarter century, believing it to be a once in a lifetime experience not likely to be repeated. That is, until 50 years ago this month, July 1969. Sullivan was steering his truck through the mountains when a bolt of lightning ripped through nearby trees and traveled into his open window, knocking the ranger unconscious for 15 minutes and singeing his hair, eyebrows and eyelashes. Fortunately, the moving truck stopped at the edge of a cliff.

"Roy was very safety conscious and always rolled his windows part way down when in his patrol vehicle so that he could hear and be warned by any external noises," said Jacobsen, whose personal memories of Sullivan were written down in 2016 and provided in recent days to the Rappahannock News. "On one occasion, as he was driving along



PHOTOS BY DREW CHICK/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Roy Sullivan on the deck of a Shenandoah National Park fire lookout tower in 1940.

Sullivan began his career as a National Park Service ranger in 1936, literally weeks after Shenandoah's boundaries were created. Never then did he think that by simply going about his ranger duties he would land in the Guinness Book of World Records — and his two charred hats in Guinness World Exhibit Halls.

Skyline Drive, lightning struck a tree alongside the road, shot through the partially open window . . . through his broad brim hat, singeing his hair and scalp before exiting through the other open window, striking a tree. . .

"We verified the location by finding the lightning marks on the two trees."

While there's a popular saying that lightning strikes twice, it wasn't finished with Sullivan. July 1970 witnessed another flash out of the blue, this one striking a power transformer, crossing a grassy area, and finding Roy's left shoulder — searing it like a steak.

Springtime 1972, two years after his scalp caught fire for the first time, Sullivan was inside a Shenandoah ranger station when lightning struck again, resetting his hair ablaze. The ranger raced into the bathroom, but couldn't squeeze his burning scalp under the sink faucet. So he doused the flames with a wet towel.

It was after this fourth lightning strike that Roy understandably

feared death. He suspected some mysterious force was intent on destroying him. His new — and only — defense: carrying a can of water with him at all times.

"During my tenure as superintendent the park spent a lot of time and effort trying to ground the Loft Mountain Campground entrance station where Roy spent much of his duty time," Jacobsen recalled, pointing out that lightning struck there more than once when Sullivan was present.

In August 1973, the unlucky ranger was on patrol in the park and spotted a suspicious storm cloud. He put his truck in reverse, wasting no time driving away. In his rearview mirror, though, he could see the dark cloud following him, so he drove on further until reaching an area of the park he thought safe.

But no sooner did Roy step out of his truck and he looked up to see a single bolt of lightning shoot from the suspect cloud, its current penetrating his left arm, down his left leg, knocking the shoe off his foot, traveling up his right leg, and setting his hair aflame. He literally crawled to his truck, retrieved his can of water, and poured it onto his smoking bewildered head.

In June 1976, as Shenandoah prepared for the nation's bicentennial, lightning tormented Roy again, this time while he was traversing a park trail. The flash tore into his ankle and set fire to whatever remained of his scalp. Once again, he would describe an ominous storm cloud that followed him through the forest.

The odds of being a lightning victim in the U.S. in any given year are about 1 in 750,000. For the same person to be struck seven times and survive — despite hundreds of kilovolts of electricity coursing through their body in milliseconds — is incalculable.

The seventh brush with death came six months after Roy retired from the park. He was enjoying a day of trout fishing in June 1977 when out of nowhere lightning struck the top of his head, and scorched his hair, chest and stomach.

"I recall that more than one doctor sent Roy transportation costs and a monetary stipend to go to them and allow them to examine him in an effort to determine the cause of Roy's attraction of lightning," Jacobsen pointed out. "My only personal exposure to Roy's attraction of lightning occurred at Big Meadows during a park training meeting at the visitor center . . . when a lightning bolt struck a tree not more than 100 feet across the parking area from us. Though both of us were momentarily shaken we were physically unharmed."

Whereas all seven strikes were documented, Sullivan prior to his death by suicide in September 1983 recalled a separate "first" encounter with lightning that occurred when he was a boy. While helping his father cut hay, the blade of his scythe was struck by lightning. He wasn't injured, and because he had no scars to prove it happened, he thought against telling people.

Roy is buried near the town of Weyers Cave, 45 miles south of Shenandoah National Park headquarters.



Roy Sullivan takes measurements in a Shenandoah National Park fire lookout tower.

When tragedy came calling to OLD HOLLOW

HOSTAGES

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was told that an emotionally agitated and violent man was not only holding his estranged common-law wife and their little boy captive, he said he planned to kill them and himself.

This latest crisis for Noesner to defuse began on March 31 in Trumbull, Conn., where Charles Anthony Leaf II kidnapped Cheryl Hart, 27, and the couple's 3-year-old son, Charles III, from the house the mother and little boy shared with her parents. Leaf had cut the telephone lines and kicked in the door, and there were signs of a struggle.

Once sufficient evidence was collected Leaf was charged with two counts of kidnapping and burglary. It became a federal offense — unlawful flight — when the three crossed state lines.

"Charlie and Cheryl had been separated for quite awhile following a long history of his verbally and physically abusing her," Noesner would write in his gripping memoir, *Stalling for Time*, which after a long run in hardcover was released in paperback last year by Penguin Random House as part of 2018's six-part Paramount Network mini-series on *Waco*.

Sperryville is the book's very first chapter.

"She had moved in with her parents and was attempting to get on with her life, but Charlie, like so many domineering and controlling males, was not willing to let her go," Noesner wrote. "The way he saw it, Cheryl and little Charlie were his possessions. He stalked her and harassed her. Once he abducted Little Charlie and held him until the police recovered the boy and returned him to Cheryl. Eventually, she sought and obtained a restraining order. The next day Charlie came to kill her.

"When Charlie cashed his paycheck . . . he purchased a carbine rifle, then sawed off the gunstock in order to conceal it. Cheryl's parents were away for the weekend, and late that night Charlie broke into the house and sneaked into Cheryl's bedroom before she could grab the butcher knife she kept under the mattress.

"It's time to die," he told her softly.

"Cheryl had the instincts of a survivor. She remained calm and convinced Charlie that he didn't have to kill her. They could go away and start a new life together with Little Charlie. Nothing in any of Cheryl's prior actions suggested she wanted any part of this man, yet he wanted so much to believe her that the gleam of hope must have obscured his skepticism, and his judgment. He gave her a few moments to get the boy out of bed and to gather up some clothes, and then they took off in Charlie's car.

"Cheryl had no plan other than to try to stay alive," Noesner explained. "All Charlie had in terms of a plan was to try and not get caught. Both knew



BY LOU HATTER/RAPPAHANNOCK NEWS FILE

After losing the trail near a hunting cabin in Old Hollow, state police tactical team members discuss their next move.

"When Charlie cashed his paycheck . . . he purchased a carbine rifle, then sawed off the gunstock in order to conceal it. Cheryl's parents were away for the weekend, and late that night Charlie broke into the house and sneaked into Cheryl's bedroom before she could grab the butcher knife she kept under the mattress.

"IT'S TIME TO DIE,' HE TOLD HER SOFTLY."

that Cheryl's parents would call the police the moment they returned from their weekend trip. And both were simply stalling for time, traveling south.

"Charlie drove through the night along the Eastern seaboard until they headed west into the mountains of Virginia. Charlie liked mountains. Years before, he had built a remote cabin in the woods in Connecticut for Cheryl and him to live in. The cabin was crude and had no indoor plumbing or electricity, but he had expected Cheryl to be happy there, dutifully awaiting his return from work each day. But she quickly grew tired of him, the cabin, and his abuse, and so she left.

"About an hour and a half due west of Washington, D.C., Charlie's car ran out of gas. They abandoned it near Sperryville, Virginia, a scenic little town on the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains. In this small and sleepy country village, where tourists came in season to buy apples and view the fall colors, Charlie took his family once again into the woods and this time built a simple lean-to. He then took Cheryl and Little Charlie to a country store nearby. They purchased a few small items, then came back that night after closing time to break in and take enough food to really sustain them."

Leaf in the woods

Lt. Jeff Brown of the Rappahannock County Sheriff's Office had no reason to believe Leaf and his captives, objects by now of a nationwide manhunt, were anywhere near Virginia, let alone Sperryville. He was patrolling along Route 612 in Old Hollow when he came upon an abandoned 1973 Chevrolet Nova. There were no license plates on the car, and its metal vehicle identification number was pried from the dashboard.

But searching the car, the RCSO lieutenant discovered personal papers bearing the name Charles Leaf. There was also a receipt for a gun purchase, and a child's clothing.

"They showed photographs of Charlie, Cheryl, and Little Charlie to the store owner, who made a positive identification," Noesner continued, at which time the RCSO "called in the Virginia State Police and the FBI, and members of these law enforcement agencies formed into teams and spent several days searching the woods and foothills with tracking dogs and police helicopters, but to no avail."

Rappahannock County Sheriff John Henry Woodward said later that the lean-to, constructed in the woods above where the car

was abandoned, was concealed in such a fashion that it was practically impossible to spot from the air. It was when Leaf moved through the area at night that he noticed a vacant farmhouse, where he would eventually be discovered.

Ironically, Leaf and his two captives entered the house — a weekend getaway place that later became the Apple Hill Farm Bed and Breakfast and now is a private home — after it had been cleared by FBI tactical teams. When authorities decided to recheck the home, and ultimately confronted Leaf, the kidnapper retreated upstairs.

“The sunlight was fading fast, so they wanted to get this one last search done as quickly as possible,” Noesner explained in his book. “First they checked all the windows and doors, looking for any signs of forced entry. The giveaway was the electric meter on the outside of the house. One of the agents noticed that it was humming along at a brisk pace, more active than what one would expect in a house that was unoccupied.”

“This was about the time that one of the FBI helicopters supporting the search landed in a field some hundred yards away. The local sheriff also showed up at about this time and provided the keys to the house.”

Less than a mile from Route 211 on Old Hollow Road, the house “was old and each footfall made the wooden steps groan and creak,” Noesner continued. “The men advanced slowly, carefully, until Charlie Leaf appeared at the top of the stairs. He held Cheryl in front of him, a gun to her head.”

“Back off!” he yelled. “Back off or I’ll kill her.”

The agents who had entered the home — members of FBI SWAT teams from Washington and Richmond — “played it by the book. ‘We’re backing off . . . Nobody’s going to get hurt.’”

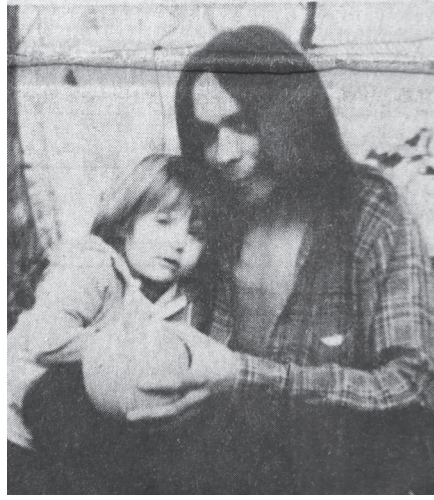
“And as the agents moved back down the stairs, the incident at Sperryville became a classic law enforcement standoff.”

Sperryville as a tool

Having answered the late-night call and told to take over the hostage negotiations in Sperryville — where the abductor was described as increasingly agitated and violent — Noesner tells the News he wasted no time jumping into his family’s station wagon, reaching Rappahannock County in under an hour’s time.

“In those days and at that hour the Fairfax and Centreville areas were nothing [like today], just a straight shot to Sperryville — pure open country,” he recalls.

Gary Noesner would eventually become founding chief of the FBI Crisis Negotiation Unit, Critical Incident Response Group, and while a significant focus of his 30-year FBI career was investigating Middle East hijackings, he was a hostage negotiator for 23 years, the last ten as the bureau’s Chief Negotiator. In that capacity he was heavily involved in right-wing militia standoffs, religious zealot sieges, prison riots, terrorist embassy takeovers, airplane hijackings, and over 120 overseas kidnapping cases that involved Americans. Among his more noteworthy cases was the Branch Davidian conflict in Waco, Texas, where he was tasked with trying to deescalate the standoff, and the Beltway sniper case.



FILE PHOTO/FBI

Charles Anthony Leaf II with his son, Charles III.

Now retired and living near Smith Mountain Lake in Virginia, Noesner has appeared before hundreds of law enforcement and corporate groups in all 50 states and over 40 countries, lecturing on hostage negotiation, kidnapping, terrorism and workplace violence. And through it all he has

topics you’re discussing, create the opportunity to develop cooperation. At the end of the day we knew that he would not have ultimately come out of the house if we had not developed a certain rapport and level of trust.”

Then again, as Noesner admits to the News: “It’s a bit odd to write a book about fooling a guy and killing him.”

The takedown

Noesner recalls this week that he spent eleven hours talking to Leaf — “we talked to each other in great detail. Part of my approach was to make him think he was going on a helicopter ride [to freedom], although I clearly knew he wasn’t. . . . The best way to do that is to paint a mental picture of what he was going to see, and by doing that I helped convince him it was going to happen, that this is for real.”

“I painted a picture of those beautiful [Blue Ridge] mountains,” says the negotiator, “where we have a pilot who will leave you, although again I knew there would be no flight or drop off. But it reinforced the notion that this ride was going to happen.”

Little Charlie. What I knew, that he didn’t, was that somewhere out in the fields surrounding us [five] FBI marksmen were poised, waiting to take his life.

“How do you convince someone that, despite all his natural fears, everything will be okay? You do it by projecting sincerity, by making him believe that what you are saying is honest and aboveboard. You address and overcome his primal need for safety and security by establishing a bond of trust. And, on rare occasions, as in this case, you do it by lying.”

“Have you ever been on a helicopter before?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

“You’ll enjoy it. The view over the mountains will be spectacular. Of course, I knew that he would never take that ride or experience that view. What I didn’t know was how much he truly believed that he was going to be able to fly away untouched.”

“Charlie, I need to ask you an important question . . . The helicopter pilot is an old friend of mine. His name is Tom Kelly. I’ve known and worked with Tom for many years, so I need your absolute promise that you won’t harm him in anyway. If anything happens to

Tom, I would never be able to live with myself.”

“I won’t hurt him,” Charlie said. The real question was: Would Charlie hurt the woman and the child he was holding hostage on the second floor of this farmhouse?”

To the FBI’s surprise, Noesner now tells us, when Leaf “finally did come out of the house the little boy was strapped to his back [wearing] a bathrobe. His nose was pressed into the back of his father’s head. His wife was inches in front of him. So that was the target as it presented itself to the five snipers out there. And I’m in the back of the house at this time, and the various sniper positions were [relaying],

“No shot! No shot! No shot!”

With little time left to react, the FBI threw some flash-bang grenades into the equation, similar to very loud firecrackers, at which point Leaf fell onto one knee. And as he was going down, the little boy’s head and body “drifted back” behind his father, Noesner describes it, creating an opening for a marksman to fire a deadly shot.

Noesner stresses it wasn’t the ending he and other law enforcement officers ever desire — when ideally a person puts down their weapon and surrenders peacefully — but the priority in the Sperryville case and any similar situation are the innocent victims. The hostage negotiator has described his gut feelings after such outcomes as a mixture of relief and anger.

The retired FBI agent says he has driven through Sperryville “many times” since the 1988 tragedy in Old Hollow and despite what happened to him and others here he will always view it as the beautiful “quaint village” so many others know it to be.



BY LOU HATTER/RAPPAHANNOCK NEWS FILE

FBI agents search the hollow during the 1988 hostage search.

never forgotten the opening chapter of his book — the techniques learned in Sperryville to defuse tense, life-threatening encounters when an abductor warns that he isn’t coming out alive — nor are his captives.

“If you can take the conversation away from the crisis at hand, and work hard to create a relationship of trust — even when you’re on the opposite side — where you might get them to go out and surrender,” he explains to this newspaper. “Deflect and steer the conversation toward something less argumentative and find some common experience, develop a level of trust — talk about camping, outdoors, construction of the farmhouse we were in. I had learned that he’d built a cabin in the woods, so we talked about how you build a cabin . . .

“So that’s a technique, and while it’s not the first time it happened, it began [to be FBI doctrine] after Sperryville — how we can begin to teach to move away from the crisis at hand . . . with

“YOU GOING TO SHOOT ME WHEN I COME OUT?”

“No,” I responded. “That’s not going to happen...”

In the opening chapter of his book, titled “It’s Time to Die, Sperryville, Virginia, April 1988,” Noesner wrote: “There it was, hard and direct. Charlie said, ‘You going to shoot me when I come out?’”

“No,” I responded. “That’s not going to happen. You said you wouldn’t hurt anyone. You said you’d drop off the pilot somewhere in the mountains. So there’s no reason for anyone to get hurt.”

“The logic of this formulation appeared to work for Charlie, perhaps because this was his only chance to go on living with Cheryl and their son,

Seven-year-old Eleanor Gallagher of Stafford didn't let Thursday's sweltering heat and humidity keep her from trying out numerous antique farm tractors of every size and color on display at the 13th Annual Rappahannock County 4th of July Celebration at Ben Venue Farms. Not surprisingly, Eleanor picked this pink Case tractor (c. 1948) painted pink as her favorite, although she said she also likes her dad's more conventional tractor. ▶ **More surrounding this year's Independence Day celebration, organized by the Sperryville Volunteer Fire Department, is found on page 6**

Giving Roy Sullivan his due — and distance

**Shenandoah
recalls park
ranger struck
seven times by
lightning**

BY JOHN McCASLIN
Rappahannock News staff

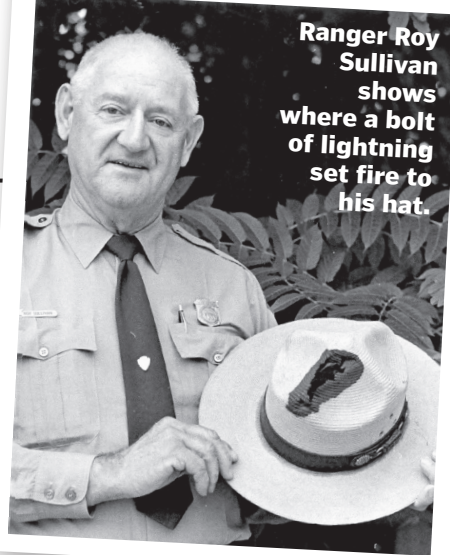
When rangers hear the clap of thunder in Shenandoah National Park they take it seriously. And for good reason.

“Roy Sullivan was a park ranger at Shenandoah National Park,” park officials educate visitors as lightning season shifts into high gear. “On seven occasions

between 1942 and 1977, Ranger Sullivan was struck by lightning and lived to tell about it. Please be safe and stop all outdoor activities when you hear thunder.”

It's not every Shenandoah Park ranger born more than a hundred years ago who is so revered today — or at least comes to

See **LIGHTNING**, Page 12



Ranger Roy Sullivan shows where a bolt of lightning set fire to his hat.

LIGHTNING

From Page 1

mind every time a thunderstorm brews above Skyline Drive.

For Roy, it wasn't easy being a "Spark Ranger." After lightning found him more than once some people purposely avoided the "Human Lightning Conductor" (another of his nicknames), fearful that the electrical current that so many times passed through him would similarly consume them.

As Roy once recalled, "I was walking with the Chief Ranger one day when lightning struck way off (in the distance). The Chief said, 'I'll see you later.'"

Robert Jacobsen, who served as Shenandoah's Park Superintendent from 1972 to 1986, recalled: "A long standing rule in the park was that if you see a dark cloud heading your way — get away from Roy Sullivan."

Born in Greene County in 1912, Sullivan began his career as a National Park Service ranger in 1936, literally weeks after Shenandoah's boundaries were created. Never then did he think that by simply going about his ranger duties he would land in the Guinness Book of World Records — and his two charred hats in Guinness World Exhibit Halls.

Guinness certified that Sullivan was struck by lightning more times than any other human being in history. As to how — and why — there are no concrete scientific answers. For Roy, it reached a point where he actually believed menacing storm clouds, for whatever inexplicable reasons, were purposely following him.

An average of 51 Americans are struck and killed by lightning every year. Many others get struck and live to tell about it. The first recorded lightning strike for the Shenandoah ranger occurred in April 1942, after he had taken cover in a new fire lookout tower yet to be fitted with lightning rods.

Roy said the tower in which he huddled was struck eight times that day, with flames "jumping" all over the place. Rather than burning to death inside, he fled outdoors, only to be struck by a thunderbolt that scorched his right leg, knocked off his big toenail, and burned a hole in his shoe.

The ranger would recall that harrowing lightning strike for the next quarter century, believing it to be a once in a lifetime experience not likely to be repeated. That is, until 50 years ago this month, July 1969. Sullivan was steering his truck through the mountains when a bolt of lightning ripped through nearby trees and traveled into his open window, knocking the ranger unconscious for 15 minutes and singeing his hair, eyebrows and eyelashes. Fortunately, the moving truck stopped at the edge of a cliff.

"Roy was very safety conscious and always rolled his windows part way down when in his patrol vehicle so that he could hear and be warned by any external noises," said Jacobsen, whose personal memories of Sullivan were written down in 2016 and provided in recent days to the Rappahannock News. "On one occasion, as he was driving along



PHOTOS BY DREW CHICK/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Roy Sullivan on the deck of a Shenandoah National Park fire lookout tower in 1940.

Sullivan began his career as a National Park Service ranger in 1936, literally weeks after Shenandoah's boundaries were created. Never then did he think that by simply going about his ranger duties he would land in the Guinness Book of World Records — and his two charred hats in Guinness World Exhibit Halls.

Skyline Drive, lightning struck a tree alongside the road, shot through the partially open window . . . through his broad brim hat, singeing his hair and scalp before exiting through the other open window, striking a tree. . .

"We verified the location by finding the lightning marks on the two trees."

While there's a popular saying that lightning strikes twice, it wasn't finished with Sullivan. July 1970 witnessed another flash out of the blue, this one striking a power transformer, crossing a grassy area, and finding Roy's left shoulder — searing it like a steak.

Springtime 1972, two years after his scalp caught fire for the first time, Sullivan was inside a Shenandoah ranger station when lightning struck again, resetting his hair ablaze. The ranger raced into the bathroom, but couldn't squeeze his burning scalp under the sink faucet. So he doused the flames with a wet towel.

It was after this fourth lightning strike that Roy understandably

feared death. He suspected some mysterious force was intent on destroying him. His new — and only — defense: carrying a can of water with him at all times.

"During my tenure as superintendent the park spent a lot of time and effort trying to ground the Loft Mountain Campground entrance station where Roy spent much of his duty time," Jacobsen recalled, pointing out that lightning struck there more than once when Sullivan was present.

In August 1973, the unlucky ranger was on patrol in the park and spotted a suspicious storm cloud. He put his truck in reverse, wasting no time driving away. In his rearview mirror, though, he could see the dark cloud following him, so he drove on further until reaching an area of the park he thought safe.

But no sooner did Roy step out of his truck and he looked up to see a single bolt of lightning shoot from the suspect cloud, its current penetrating his left arm, down his left leg, knocking the shoe off his foot, traveling up his right leg, and setting his hair aflame. He literally crawled to his truck, retrieved his can of water, and poured it onto his smoking bewildered head.

In June 1976, as Shenandoah prepared for the nation's bicentennial, lightning tormented Roy again, this time while he was traversing a park trail. The flash tore into his ankle and set fire to whatever remained of his scalp. Once again, he would describe an ominous storm cloud that followed him through the forest.

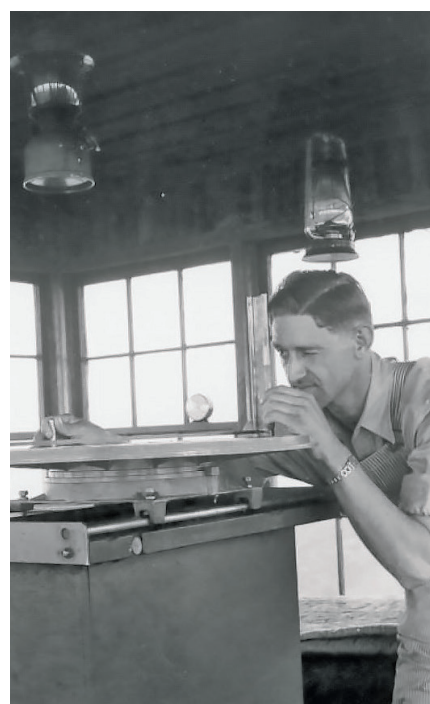
The odds of being a lightning victim in the U.S. in any given year are about 1 in 750,000. For the same person to be struck seven times and survive — despite hundreds of kilovolts of electricity coursing through their body in milliseconds — is incalculable.

The seventh brush with death came six months after Roy retired from the park. He was enjoying a day of trout fishing in June 1977 when out of nowhere lightning struck the top of his head, and scorched his hair, chest and stomach.

"I recall that more than one doctor sent Roy transportation costs and a monetary stipend to go to them and allow them to examine him in an effort to determine the cause of Roy's attraction of lightning," Jacobsen pointed out. "My only personal exposure to Roy's attraction of lightning occurred at Big Meadows during a park training meeting at the visitor center . . . when a lightning bolt struck a tree not more than 100 feet across the parking area from us. Though both of us were momentarily shaken we were physically unharmed."

Whereas all seven strikes were documented, Sullivan prior to his death by suicide in September 1983 recalled a separate "first" encounter with lightning that occurred when he was a boy. While helping his father cut hay, the blade of his scythe was struck by lightning. He wasn't injured, and because he had no scars to prove it happened, he thought against telling people.

Roy is buried near the town of Weyers Cave, 45 miles south of Shenandoah National Park headquarters.



Roy Sullivan takes measurements in a Shenandoah National Park fire lookout tower.