

**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*

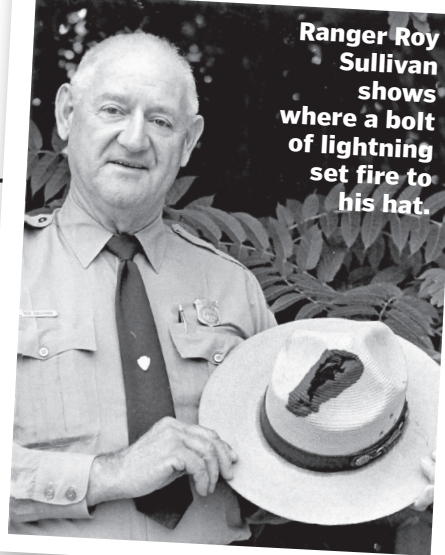
When rangers hear the clap of thunder in Shenandoah National Park they take it seriously. And for good reason.

“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.**

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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.

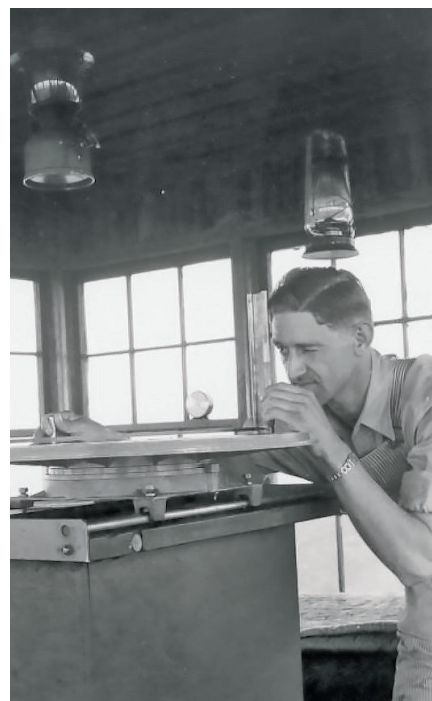
The odds of being a lightning victim in the U.S. in any given year are about 1 in 750,000. For the same person to be struck seven times and survive — despite hundreds of kilovolts of electricity coursing through their body in milliseconds — is incalculable.

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.**