

A Glimpse of an Arlington that Once Was

BY JIM MATLACK

The Wanderbirds Hiking Club was organized in the spring of 1934 by Robert Shosteck, a young man interested in nature and the outdoors, in cooperation with *The Washington Post*. The newspaper agreed to sponsor the club, and Mr. Shosteck would write articles on outdoor subjects, including one a week which would describe a hike to take place the following Sunday, giving the time and place of meeting.¹

The first Wanderbirds hike took place on April 1, 1934, mainly in the Chain Bridge section of Arlington County, although it began and ended in the District of Columbia. Mr. Shosteck's article on the hike describes a part of Arlington that was far different from the modern urban Arlington of today. It was a wooded area of wildflowers, wildlife, springs, remains of Civil War fortifications, giant anthills, and remnants of old estates. To me it is an idyllic description of a lost world. Although the hikers traversed only a small section of the county, it may have been representative of much of old rural Arlington.

Mr. Shosteck's article does contain some errors. He refers to the "valley of the upper Potomac." Actually, the Potomac in the area about which he is writing is in a gorge that the river has cut into the piedmont, a low undulating plateau. He writes that the hike is in the coastal plain. In reality, it was in the piedmont. The boundary between the two geologic regions is in the vicinity of Key Bridge. He misspells the Pimmit in Pimmit Run as "Pimmett", and refers to Gulf Branch as Gulf "Run" despite claiming a great and long-time familiarity with the area in which it is located in a letter of February 1, 1959.² Finally, he calls Glebe Road "Cherrydale road." The latter name would be a more appropriate term for Military Road since it runs from Glebe Road to Cherrydale. Actually, the woods road he and his hikers took from Gulf Branch to "Cherrydale road" may have led to Military Road rather than Glebe Road. I have a June 1935 revision of the 1935 map of Arlington issued by the Arlington County Engineering Department. My older brother Albert Matlack, when a Boy Scout, penciled in the routes of woods roads and trails in the Palisades area on the map after we moved to Arlington in 1936. He shows a road running from Gulf Branch to Military Road near where the latter road ran into Glebe Road. It could have been the "dirt road" shown on Mr. Shosteck's map. The junction of Military and Glebe Roads has been considerably altered since then. (*Text continues on page 32.*)

From the Washington Post, April 1, 1934:

Post Readers Invited on Outing Of Wander-Birds' Hiking Club

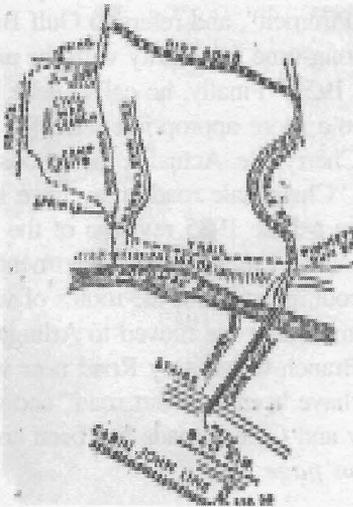
Valley of Upper Potomac Has Many Beauties to Be Visited Sunday.

Announcing organization of the Wander-birds Hiking Club, The Post invites its readers and others to participate Sunday in the first of a series of weekly tramps under direction of Robert Shosteck, trail leader for the University Hiking Club.

By Robert Shosteck.

The valley of the upper Potomac is perhaps one of the most attractive regions for the early spring hiker. The bursting greenness of spring seems to come first to this fertile wooded area.

For our hike through this part of the Coastal Plain we have se-



lected the woods lying between Pimmett Run and Gulf Run, since this section is the most accessible from the District and since it contains numerous fortifications of historical interest. Likewise, it should be of interest to the naturalist since one may find an abundance of spring flowers, birds, and occasional small game. In the Gulf Run valley alone one can find 14 varieties of ferns and several orchids, not to mention the fascinating anthills found farther up. We begin our hike at Station 20, on the Cabin John carline. Then down the short street to the B. and O. track, following the path over the track and down to the Chain Bridge. We cross the bridge and then cross the new concrete Pimmett Run Bridge, taking the uphill trail, starting about 100 feet on the left side beyond the end of the bridge. Many paths will tempt us to the right, but we bear close to the left, following the edge of the palisade all the way to Gulf Run, the first creek we meet.

Many Flowers Here.

Along this upper trail the hiker will find a profusion of wild flowers. In early April there will probably be found in abundance the stonecrop, arbutus, hepatica, bluet and chickweed. A little later the spring beauty, bloodroot and wild geranium will abound.

We turn up Gulf Run, crossing to the left bank, and follow the trail

but a few hundred feet until we reach a tiny rivulet which drains a spring. Taking the trail going obliquely to the left uphill, we reach a camp site and then bear to our left along a trail which leads to the fence of an old estate. Hidden in dense brush on our right are stone breastworks erected during the Civil War as a defense of the approach to Washington. Here occasional cannonballs and iron fragments of guns have been found. We follow the path along the fence until the first valley on our right, here taking the trail down.

If we can afford a detour on the hillside on our right we shall find a series of anthills, some of them 2 feet high and 4 feet in diameter. These are honeycombed with passages and chambers, and each is inhabited by many thousands of ants. Beyond the anthills are remnants of an old Civil War estate - some old climbing roses, lilac bushes and periwinkle. One can barely discern the foundations of the mansion which once stood there.

Back Toward Chain Bridge.

Returning to our trail, we soon reached Gulf Run once more. We cross and after a short walk up the run, reach a barely visible road on the right - little more than two

parallel tracks overgrown with grass. Along this road the watchful hiker may find the pansy violet, the most beautiful of our native violets. Later in the spring jack in the pulpit will be particularly abundant in the valley along the road. In the woods along this road rabbits, squirrels and mice may occasionally be seen; in fact, the writer has on occasion caught a young bunny in a fair chase through the brush. Of course, the bunny gained his freedom after a brief interview.

Continuing along the road we eventually reach the Cherrydale road which we follow down to Chain Bridge. The entire trip, including detours should not take more than two hours, so if the hiker wishes to do an additional 3 miles, a walk back to Georgetown along the towpath is suggested. A stairway from the bridge at the point where the bridge goes over the canal makes the towpath easily accessible.

(This hike will be conducted Sunday, starting at 11 a. m. from Station 20 (Chain Bridge Station) on the Cabin John or Potomac Heights car line. Bring lunch, and canteen if you have one.)

One problem with Mr. Shosteck's map in the *Post* article is that north is toward the bottom of the map. It is in a sense upside down. It was no problem for me, however.

I made three visits to the locale of the first Wanderbirds hike: on June 8, 2001 and on April 2 and May 30, 2002. I was particularly interested in finding remnants of Civil War trenches. Robert Shosteck, in the 1973 revision of his Potomac Trail Book, writes "one . . . can see the remnants of old Civil War rifle pits, on the right side [of Gulf Branch], going upstream."³ So maybe they might be still there, I thought.

In what was a wooded area in 1934, only two strips of wooded parkland remain: one along Gulf Branch and the other along the top of the Palisades. The latter is further split into two parts by the George Washington Memorial Parkway, which runs close to the Palisades. There is a trail between Military Road and the Potomac which follows Gulf Branch, used in part by fishermen, and another along the edge of the Palisades between Glebe Road and Gulf Branch. The latter trail forms part of the Potomac Heritage Trail, which parallels the Virginia shore of the Potomac from Roosevelt Island to the Beltway. Both trails are shown on the 1935 map of Arlington annotated by my brother.

I should add that the narrow strip of parkland along Gulf Branch is hemmed in on either side by residential development except for the short stretch on Parkway land. On the western or River Crest side, 36th Road North comes very close to the stream. On the eastern or Bellevue Forest side, the streets do not come as close, but several are not far away. I think that most of the development near the stream took place after 1955. I have several revisions of the map originally issued by the Arlington County, Virginia Engineering Department in 1935. That of February 1955 shows no streets in what is now River Crest, and only one, North Monroe Street, near Gulf Branch in Bellevue Forest. The July 1965 revision shows streets in River Crest and Bellevue Forest pretty much as they are now.

On my June 8, 2001 trip to the area, I walked the Palisades Trail and found it pretty much where it had been in 1934 as described by Mr. Shosteck. The stretch of Glebe Road followed by him and his hikers probably has not changed much either. It is still only two lanes wide down to the bridge over Pimmit Run. But it would be dangerous to walk along now due to heavy traffic and a lack of shoulder space.

Until recently, the Palisades Trail started a short distance above the Glebe Road bridge over Pimmit Run, just as it did in 1934. However, by my May 30, 2002 trip, the trail had been moved a short distance so as to go under the bridge to avoid the dangerous pedestrian crossing of Glebe Road.⁴

Another important change since 1934 has been the construction of the George Washington Memorial Parkway. It parallels the trail except for a very short distance where the trail is actually under the Parkway bridge over Glebe Road. The trail is sandwiched into a narrow strip of land between the Palisades and the Parkway. It is so close to the edge of the Palisades in a few places as to be somewhat frightening. That, the constant noise from the Parkway, and the poison ivy along the trail, make a walk along it less than enjoyable. However, there is one stretch of the trail from which you can see Chain Bridge through the trees, at least when they are bare. It is a scene etched in my memory since childhood. I must have been along that trail when I first walked to Chain Bridge with my older brother about 1938 or 1939. It was the first time I had seen the bridge built in 1938; it replaced an iron truss bridge built in 1874.⁵

As I was descending the Palisades Trail toward Gulf Branch, I noticed a path leading off to the right. I thought it might lead to the Civil War trench I sought. It led to a barren area under the Parkway bridge over Gulf Branch. I paused under the bridge and walked ahead a short distance. There before me in the woods was a remnant of an old trench, maybe a hundred feet long. My mind went back over sixty years; the scene reminded me of that part of Fort C.F. Smith in Arlington which had been destroyed by residential development about 1939. My home was near the fort, and I once tried to dig for artifacts there with a trowel. Being about eight years old, I was unsuccessful. Not having brought a trowel with me on this occasion, I proceeded on a short distance and found another, much shorter remnant of trench. Beyond it lay somebody's yard, so I retraced my steps to the Palisades Trail, where on May 30, 2002, I found that the trail is actually in a remnant of the Civil War trench for a very short distance. An employee at the Gulf Branch Nature Center had told me that a portion of the trench had been destroyed during the construction of the Parkway bridge over Gulf Branch, and I found that a short portion of it north of the bridge remains. It is in alignment with the two remnants south of the bridge.

On my June 8, 2001 trip, after descending the Palisades Trail to Gulf Branch, I followed the trail along it upstream a short distance until I crossed a small rivulet on a wooden bridge. Just beyond it was a "trail going obliquely to the left uphill" as described in Mr. Shosteck's article on his hike in the *Post*. It is a trail of some importance since steps have been constructed in the lower part of it. I ascended it, but it led neither to a camp site nor a fence as it did in 1934, but rather to the end of North Monroe Street and an area of expensive homes in Bellevue Forest. I then searched the hillside above Gulf Branch for a while looking for evidence of the Civil

War trench shown on Mr. Shosteck's map as being to the east of Gulf Branch, but without success. I returned to the east side of Gulf Branch on May 30, 2002 and searched for both the Civil War trench and the giant anthills mentioned by Mr. Shosteck. I came to the conclusion that both were on the high ground above Gulf Branch and have been destroyed by residential development.⁶

I find it especially sad that the anthills are gone. I remember anthills such as Mr. Shosteck describes in what is now the Riverwood subdivision of Arlington before it was developed in the late 1940s. As far as I know, they were all destroyed. It was a shame for they were a wonder to behold. I have seen some since in various places while hiking. I have been told they are constructed by "Allegheny Ants."

On my June 8, 2001 trip, I descended the trail from North Monroe Street and returned to the aforementioned rivulet and went up it to find the spring Mr. Shosteck wrote was drained by it. I ascended it to a point where I was blocked by a fence over it. But downhill from the fence, in a deeply eroded section of the streambed, water was coming out of the ground and flowing downhill, though it didn't reach Gulf Branch.

I thought that perhaps I had found the site of the spring I was seeking, but that the former spring opening had been destroyed by erosion. At any rate, there was no water running in the part of the streambed between there and the fence farther uphill.

I went up two other rivulets on the east side of Gulf Branch looking for springs. I did not find any and had to stop searching lest I trespass on someone's backyard. In an article on the springs of Arlington, Eleanor Lee Templeman wrote "all of our springs and streams are decreasing in volume, or drying up completely, due to the constant lowering of the ground-water level. Homes, buildings, paved streets and parking lots divert the rain water into storm sewers, preventing the water from seeping into the ground as nature intended."⁷



Jim Matlock

Remains of Civil War trench on the west side of Gulf Branch valley, April 2, 2002.

Consequently, I doubt that it is a good idea to look for springs which existed before the areas in which they were located became developed.

On my April 2, 2002 trip, I found some of the same wildflowers mentioned by Mr. Shosteck, whose hike was on an April 1. I especially noticed spring beauty and bloodroot and was told by personnel at the Gulf Branch Nature Center that arbutus and hepatica had already bloomed. I also saw some periwinkle, which I have been told is not a wild flower, but is mentioned in Mr. Shosteck's article. Mr. Shosteck also mentions ferns, which I found along the Palisades Trail and growing on the slopes of Gulf Branch valley, sometimes in great profusion, on my June 8, 2001 and May 30, 2002 trips.

There are other changes that have taken place since 1934 that should be mentioned. The dirt road which Mr. Shosteck's hikers took from Gulf Branch to "Cherrydale road" has undoubtedly been destroyed by the development of River Crest. Gulf Branch has become heavily eroded in places, probably due to the clearing of land in its watershed and the consequent increase in rain runoff. And, as I have indicated earlier, there is a different Chain Bridge.

There are a few remnants of what was, according to Mr. Shosteck, in 1934 a "fertile wooded area": two limited areas of woodland with their ferns and wildflowers, a few trails, three small sections of a Civil War trench, and a two lane stretch of Glebe Road.



Chain Bridge, March 19, 1936.

The Wanderbirds Archives



The Wanderbirds Archives

The birth of the Wanderbirds, hike number one, April 1, 1934. Robert Shosteck is the third person from the left.

However, far more has changed in this part of Arlington than has remained the same. Two modern, suburban subdivisions now cover, for the most part, an area that less than a lifetime ago was undeveloped with only a few houses. A noisy highway slices through one of the few remaining sections of woodland in that part of Arlington. One could not take the 1934 hike today due not only to residential development but also to the danger of walking along Glebe Road, and since January 3, 1960, one cannot take a streetcar out to the vicinity of Chain Bridge and walk across it into Arlington.⁸ Fortunately, a piece of the woodland that once existed near the Palisades in Arlington has been preserved not far away in Potomac Overlook Park, so all, at least, has not been lost.

I am sure that reading Mr. Shosteck's 1934 article will create in many a feeling of nostalgia for a world which is gone forever from Arlington, a world in which people lived closer to nature and its peace and beauty.

As for the Wanderbirds, they returned to Arlington on March 28, 1935 to celebrate the first anniversary of their club's founding. This they did at the Windsor Arms Tavern near Ballston with a dinner and dance, which cost \$1.50.⁹

Epilogue

Although the *Washington Post* stopped sponsoring the Wanderbirds in 1936, the club survived and is now doing quite well. Hikes are scheduled for every Sunday of the year. However, there has been a change in the

locations of most of the hikes. In the early years of the club, most of the hikes were not far from Washington, but subsequent suburban development has left only a few local trails available for hiking. Consequently, the Wanderbirds now hike mostly in the mountains due to the availability of trails there. The club uses a chartered bus for most of its trips.

Jim Matlack is the Archivist of the Wanderbirds Hiking Club, and is a former Membership Chairman of the Arlington Historical Society. He invites readers to obtain further information on the Wanderbirds by visiting the club's Web site at <http://www.wanderbirds.org>.

Endnotes

¹ Jim Matlack, ed., *Wanderbirds Hiking Club: A History, 1934-1994* (Bethesda, MD: Wanderbirds Hiking Club, Inc., 1994), p. 2.

² A handwritten letter dated Feb. 1, 1959 by Robert Shosteck titled "Beginnings of the Wanderbirds Hiking Club," in the Wanderbirds archives.

³ Robert Shosteck, *Potomac Trail Book* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 1973), p. 98.

⁴ *The Washington Post*, Sunday, Apr. 14, 2002, p. C3.

⁵ For information on the various Chain Bridges, see Eleanor Lee Templeman, *Arlington Heritage: Vignettes of a Virginia County* (Arlington: The Author, 1959), p. 54, and Jim Fearson, "Chain Bridge: A History of the Bridge and its Surrounding Territory, 1608-1991," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 9, No. 3, October 1991, pp. 7-28.

⁶ A photocopy of a map in the National Archives of the Civil War defenses of Chain Bridge shows a line of fortifications to the west of Gulf Branch, but none to the east. Benjamin Franklin Cooling III and Walton H. Owen II, *Mr. Lincoln's Forts: A Guide to the Civil War Defenses of Washington* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing Co., 1988), p. 113.

⁷ Eleanor Lee Templeman, "Springs of Arlington," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 8, No. 4, October 1988, pp. 23-24.

⁸ LeRoy O. King, Jr., *100 Years of Capital Traction: The Story of Streetcars in the Nation's Capital* (Taylor Publ. Co., 1972), p. 181.

⁹ Matlack, ed., *Wanderbirds Hiking Club*, p. 4.