



La Voix des Femmes: The Saga of Violette Wakeland

by *karol cooper*

Part One: Life in the Southern Highlands

Armed with a hard-earned teaching degree, an unquenchable spirit and an overloaded truck that foretold of latter-day Beverly Hillbillies, Violette Wakeland and her potter/husband Ray came to Sunset Rock (Tennessee mountains) in 1952. With her daughter Virginia happily married and busily producing five children, the timing was right for Violette to pursue the dreams that she and Ray had clung to in the darkest nights. Now, as a mature woman of 45, Violette was ready to begin her great adventure.



When they announced their imminent move to the people back home in Chicago, they received a negative response: "You will find the people on the mountain are different." In her Memoirs, Violette wrote, "*It was hard for us to assume the truth of that statement until we experienced it ourselves.*" Little did she know how portentous those forebodings were — that she was embarking on an epic journey into Life that would bring her the greatest of joy and the deepest of sorrow, the fulfillment of her wildest dreams and the realization of true loss.



Sunset Rock juts out over the bluff — a huge slab of west-facing sandstone at whose feet spreads beautiful Pelham Valley, a patchwork of farms complete with distant sounds of lowing cattle and webbed with tiny roads traveled by tiny cars. Throughout her 40 years on the bluff Violette would come to rely on Sunset Rock, "The Rock," as a place of refuge, a haven to collect her thoughts, to pray, to drink in Mother Nature's bounty. It was from The Rock that she gathered the courage she needed for the battles set before her.

As the days lengthened all of nature was awakening. Buds on the trees showed color; swelling balls of flower were appearing on the dogwood; birds were exuberant with mating song and nesting activity. I could hardly contain myself in this exhilaration of resurrection. I ran through the wood with arms outspread and

even leaped with the rhythm of life. I breathed deeply of fresh, fragrant air; I opened my face to the warming sun. When rain showers came I let myself be drenched in its ablution. "Dear God!" I cried, "How can it be that I am so blessed!"



With gusto Violette and Ray tackled their new life in Monteagle, Tennessee, on the 103 acres of prime bluff land they had purchased. On this ground was a magical stone edifice, "The Ruins," a roofless structure built at the turn of the century, full of nooks and crannies, built-in stone benches, a cistern — the perfect place for Ray to build his pottery shop. Thus began the arduous task of taming the forest and preparing for construction: first a pottery shop for Ray, then later a home for the two of them. In the meantime they rented a small house in Monteagle, about three miles away.

The first project would be to clear a 40-foot right-of-way for the electric line through the woods, up the mountainside from the highway to our bluff site. I think back on the foolishness of that activity, as we did the job without the convenience of a chain saw; we were naïve enough to think we could emulate the frontiersmen, and we did accomplish it with hand axe and crosscut saw. It really was not an unpleasant venture.

Not an unpleasant venture? This is a daunting task when you actually look at the site — a rocky, brush- and tree-covered 45-degree incline full of vines and snakes, a hand-over-hand climb at some points. Yet Violette's writing expresses only her enthusiasm for their new home and the work it entailed.

My main responsibility was to watch the fires lest they get out of control. One day my explorative inclinations took me too far away from a big brush fire...suddenly I saw flames accelerating up the incline and licking into grass and dry leaves at the top. Ray quickly drove into town to call the forest-fire fighters. I learned respect for fire in the wood, which I have ever remembered.

This respect would save her life in the years to come at Sunset Rock.

I was mainly concerned with removing brush and saplings that had almost obscured the structure. I became immensely stimulated with the project as I uncovered new plants, trees and creatures of the soil. It was an experience of coming alive to all those submerged sensations of being in alliance with things of the natural.

Throughout her memoirs, Violette expresses an irrepressible delight in her surroundings, a growing love of nature and an appreciation for Mother Earth, but:

My education into nature was not all joy. The rock walls were covered with vines and since there was no foliage to identify the plant we assumed the species was poison ivy. I courageously removed all the vines and piled them for burning after they were thoroughly dry. When they were dried, I set fire to the pile with no caution as to release of remaining oils. The next day I was itching with little blisters erupting over my whole body. Poison ivy sap had been released as a

spray and I was infected over my whole body. I was in excruciating misery until recovery, but gained an everlasting respect for poison ivy.

For Violette, life on the mountain wasn't all about loving nature and living the life of frontiersmen. The townspeople were suspicious of the Yankee newcomers ("furriners"), often ascribing to them deeds that were not their own. A case in point is the [Highlander Folk School](#).

Quite soon after our coming, people began asking us about Highlander Folk School. We had never heard of it and we were confused about it, but not particularly interested. Its significance and purpose could not be determined. Why we were questioned pertaining to it would be determined later when pieces of the puzzle took shape in events related to people's suspicions and resentment regarding our advent into the community.

From [Myles Horton](#), the director of the school, they learned what Highlander Folk School was all about. In the '20s, a wealthy Mrs. Johnson became interested in setting up a *Folkschule* to educate people in improved means of subsistence, such as home handcrafts, home economics, agriculture and horticulture. When Mrs. Johnson retired she engaged as director Myles Horton, who had become well known for his leadership in uniting mine workers for improved conditions. At that time anything associated with union organization was linked to communism. In the '50s, when communism became a national scare during [the McCarthy era](#), to be labeled "communist" was the worst thing that could be said about a person. Agitation grew against Myles and the school with subsequent investigation by the FBI. No substantiation was found to support non-patriotic duties, but local suspicions grew. After the Supreme Court ruling in 1954 gave equal privileges to minorities, the desegregation movement took on momentum. Highlander Folk School responded to this impetus by conducting training workshops for the effort. [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) and [Eleanor Roosevelt](#) were two of its most celebrated supporters.

At that time Grundy County, where Violette and Ray had settled, prided itself in being totally white, so prejudice against [desegregation](#) was pronounced. Although there was no organized [Ku Klux Klan](#), resistance was on the level of Klan intensity. Efforts to close the Highlander School were ongoing, and Violette suffered the attitudes of locals for her erroneously imagined relationship with the school. Feelings of racial conflict ran rampant.

One day when she arrived at her classroom in the local high school in Grundy County, her students were in a clamor. An effigy of a black person was hanging on the gym door. When questioned, the students expressed their anger and horror that four African-American pupils had been enrolled in Grundy primary school. The students and their parents were up in arms. When asked what her response would be if she were called upon to teach a black person, Violette's passionate reply was that it wouldn't make any difference. Immediately she was labeled a communist "n-lover."

I accepted my role with dignity; I performed my services with sincerity and conscientiousness; people could believe what they wished; my self-respect was not diminished. I believed in the integrity of the human spirit and I intended to fight for its preservation.

This incident proved to be the beginning of the end of her teaching days.

In addition to their growing unsavory — but unwarranted — reputation, Violette and Ray began to encounter some serious opposition from the Methodist Sunday School Assembly in Monteagle. The Assembly is an enclave of the South's wealthy, who before the advent of air-

conditioning came to the mountain to escape the heat and build summer homes together in a cluster. This "assembly" is governed by a board of directors who demonstrated over the years their lust to own Violette's property and the lengths to which they would go in order to acquire it.

*Situated as we were on the edge of the bluff meant that access to our property had to cross Assembly acreage. We were not aware that certain individuals of the Assembly community had jealously eyed our property through the years. Mrs. Walker, from whom we bought the land, had refused to sell to them, perhaps for some personal reasons. As those individuals witnessed our continuing development speculations and envy intensified: How could it be that 'damned Yankees' had been able to acquire that enviable property? How could our efforts be thwarted? **Close the access road.***



And close it they did by constructing a barrier across the entrance. Considering that from Sunset Rock to the barrier the hike is over a mile, carrying building supplies and hauling loads of fill dirt for that distance would force their construction to grind to a halt. Ray and Violette were compelled to take legal action, hiring a lawyer and battling for their rights in court. The road was grudgingly reopened but the harassment continued.

Violette was to encounter intense conflict with the Assembly that would affect her relationships with the townspeople, with her church fellowship, her teaching career and ultimately her survival. This is the story of a woman who refused to be beaten by Life's vicissitudes, a warrior with Athena-like qualities who battled back with courage, imagination, tenacity and an indomitable spirit. Join us over the next three months as her incredible story unfolds.

Rivers Side



This is part two in a continuing series about Violette Wakeland. Please refer to ACR archives for part I. kc

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Part II: Storm Clouds Gather

Despite resistance, in the summer of 1961 Violette and Ray began the construction of their dream house on the bluff. They were happy to be making progress on their vision to build a home beside Violette's beloved Rock—a warm home where Ray could set up his pottery shop in the basement; a home where the grandchildren could visit and where all of nature would be embraced. They worked non-stop, far into the nights. As the weather turned colder their efforts intensified.

*Some time in the night we managed to go to our bed hoping to realize some warmth in togetherness. The bedding was so cold that our body warmth served only to give heat to slabs of ice. We didn't sleep a wink. Should we say that our reception to pioneering was
ICE COLD?*

The work was grueling and exhausting. At every turn their progress was hampered by the abundance of large rocks but Violette showed her usual positive approach to life:

Mounds of rock from the excavation were piled here and there. As I viewed them day in and day out I began to envision a landscaping plan for the time when I finally lived out there. Landscaping became

one of my consuming interests. I was completely at home in this setting of nature's lovelies and made effort to enhance the effect. As I viewed the lichen-covered rocks I envisioned them with plantings of native plants growing in borders along the perimeters. Collecting shrubs and plants became another project.

The remains of Violette's creative and lovely use of these rocks in the landscaping can still be seen on her property today.

Work on the house slowly progressed. Because of the slope of the land, they had dug out a hole in the mountainside for the basement's restraining wall. The footings and walls for the basement were finished, and Ray was able to borrow a tractor to put fill dirt behind the wall. He had intended to add it gradually to let the dirt settle, but since the tractor was available for one day only he was forced to add the fill all at once.

That night there was a fierce storm that brought five inches of rain, and early the next morning when Ray went out to look over the situation he returned with tears in his eyes. The restraining wall was crumbling under pressure. Days later, after frames and supports were added to the wall, the concrete was poured. Suddenly one of the frames gave way, cement poured out and they were forced to rush in emergency supplies to make repairs. Ray almost collapsed from the urgency and pressure.

I think it was then that I had a clue that Ray's ulcerous condition was being greatly aggravated by the unusual pressure of circumstances, and I had a slight premonition that our plans might be in jeopardy.

Ray's health, never the best, deteriorated throughout the winter. His low physical condition, coupled with the subversive atmosphere, affected his emotions to the point of despondency. He had been afflicted with duodenal ulcers for many years and emotional stress aggravated the condition. With the demands of building and the constant persecution from the Assembly, he stayed in a state of severe ulcer flare-up.

One day we had to walk to the shop to stack lumber. On the way in we had to stop several times for him to relieve pain in his chest.

Winter came and the pottery shop was finished. Ray worked there during the day, joining Violette at home in town before dark. Inevitably the day came when Life

gave Ray back to the Giver. On that day, Violette, alarmed that he wasn't home, walked the miles over to the shop and called out to him. The bright lights greeted her, all seemed well, and as she approached the pottery shed she imagined that Ray was waiting for the kiln to come up to heat. Opening the door, she called his name out brightly.

The awesome silence of death echoed a reply — and then I saw his prostrate body at the foot of the stool where he had been working. I cried out in anguish as I felt the full weight of all our problems fall upon me. I WAS ALONE!

The alliances that Violette and Ray had formed with some of the local artists, as well as the friends they had made at church, provided essential support for her now in her time of need. The Ramseys were special friends, and they brought Fa-Fa into her life at just the right moment.

Fa-Fa was a white German shepherd puppy, given to Violette to protect her and provide companionship for her now that she was alone. His devotion and attachment to her were obvious even in the beginning. This love and loyalty would save Violette's life more than once in the ten years that Fa was by her side.

Following Ray's burial, to add insult to injury, Assembly members stepped up their efforts to drive Violette out and claim her land.

Now that Ray was gone certain aggressive individuals of the Monteaagle Assembly group determined to harass me into selling the property. They made it a point to trespass the property with full right of possession [Author's note: And still do to this day]. I placed a barrier across the entrance; it was promptly removed. I put up No Trespassing signs; they were removed as well. It seemed as if all forces of evil were in league against me.

It was a bleak time and Violette often sought the solace of The Rock. She was beset with peril on all sides: The Assembly continued its campaign to capture her land; the school board required that Violette appear before them to answer charges for alleged consortion with the Highlander Folk School as well as her liberal views on human rights; and she was newly widowed at the age of 55. She often visited the construction site and spent time there clearing and straightening the remaining supplies.

Darkness came on early and often I would be working far into the

night. Blustery winds came in November, and I remember one particular incident when the wind was almost cyclonic in fury. I was trying to secure materials to keep them from blowing away, and I myself was almost swept off my feet. At that moment in this darkness and uncertainty I cried. I was alone, and external forces were besetting me with a fury.

Left alone to face the growing animosity of the townsfolk, the now-unrelieved burden of owning a prize piece of land and the greed it inspired, Violette struggled to regain her equilibrium.

My mind was numb and my body moved mechanically. My faculties operated by instinct; I wondered at times at reality. Despite my almost paralyzed state of being, pressures by greedy fellow-human beings put painful demand upon my vulnerable state of widowhood. They soared as anticipating vultures to pick all the flesh from my means of survival. They coveted the land; they grasped for personal effects; they swooped and struck with persistency until, in desperation, I went to my lawyer for help in getting them off my back.

Rather than force her to sell, their efforts strengthened her resolve: she would never sell to the Assembly. Violette sought the comfort of The Rock for answers to her many dilemmas.

Time for resumption of school was approaching and I was in a dilemma over what to do about the property. One Sunday evening I came to look over the situation and meditate about the future. Sitting on The Rock, looking directly at the big mess of our construction, a thought suddenly evolved which determined my future for good. People make apartments out of basements, why can't I make living quarters out of this structure?

Realizing that her dreams of an idyllic artist's life with Ray on Sunset Bluff would not be realized, Violette once again took life by the horns and continued the construction of the dream house — with changes. The almost-completed basement that she and Ray had so arduously shored up would become her new home. Construction on the house resumed.

Since the building project was evidence of her permanency on the bluff, it aroused dismay among the Assembly. One day when the construction workers arrived at the site they found a steel post imbedded in concrete blocking the entrance to the roadway. A legal injunction against the Assembly protecting her right to ingress was in effect, so she called her lawyer to report this infraction.

Orders from the Assembly president, Mr. Jacobs, mandated NO REMOVAL.

Consequently, Violette boldly had a warrant served against the Assembly powers-that-be and again fought them in court to assure her rights and keep the road open to her building site.

My image suffered much from this incident as the Assembly people imposed martyrdom on themselves at the hands of "that awful Mrs. Wakeland." My reputation was a mark of slander and some of the business people who catered to the Assembly patronage refused my business. One service station operator in particular told me not to request anymore services from him.

Kant may have been right when he said, "Truth is the child of time; before long she shall appear to vindicate you," but living under the pall of unjust accusation takes its toll. Violette was beginning to crumble under the pressure.

*This is part three in a continuing series about Violette Wakeland. Please refer to ACR archives for parts I and II. **kc***

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Part III: Fire on the Mountain

In April of 1964, four months after Ray's death, Violette moved into her new abode at Sunset Rock. At last she had a place to call home! Her memoirs convey her happiness in that fact, but being continually misjudged weighed heavily upon her.

In times of stress work had always been an essential diversion for Violette. With the completion of her new home behind her, she plunged headlong into the task of reorganizing her life. Work stimulated her dreams for the future.

Life is always in stages of perpetuity; the human spirit is resilient. I put all things in order with expectancy, and that expectancy of the future gradually relieved my paralysis of body and soul.

Finally she was able to resume her teaching. The response of the students to her sorrow was gratifying; their exuberance and interminable energy revived her.

Relationships with students at the high school evolved into gratifying rapport. I was amenable to their teenage needs. This was the sixties, a time of protests, and they were caught up with the trend of the times just as I had been in the transitional times of the 20s.

Her students confided in her, trusted her. She went to bat on their behalf and revived the prom; she arranged field trips for them; she counseled with them about family problems and boyfriends.

I suppose I imposed teaching demands upon myself that weren't entirely necessary but I felt the needs of my students so greatly that the work began to take toll of my physical stamina.

During her teaching years. Violette formed a solid relationship with one of her students, Sanford McGee. Sanford was president of the student council and a good scholar: Violette taught him sophomore English. Sanford describes

Violette's teaching style as "tough and fair," and his valuable tutoring at her proverbial knee changed him for life. He was a member of the Youth Leadership Conference, and as a result he attended meetings in Violette's home on Sunset Bluff. Those meetings in the magical setting of Sunset Rock solidified Sanford's deepest desire to live a life that was "fully engaged" — one that embraced life to the hilt, a life surrounded by nature and the arts. Violette's influence changed Sanford's life. Today he says, "She invited me into her life and I said 'yes!'"



Yet life at school was not all roses. After giving her soul to educating and nurturing the youth of her area, Violette was constantly under the gun, called into the principal's office to give an accounting of every action. A student confided more and more of the slanderous remarks the townspeople were making; Violette sensed a deliberate surveillance by the principal; the work load was staggering; she felt the tension of harassment and the emotional impact of unfair conditions. All these factors began to add up to more than she was physically and emotionally able to bear.

I was in a state of total physical collapse. I had to garner enough strength to function for necessities, but driving the car was a matter of considerable caution. I moved in a state of stupor, hardly being aware of my immediate circumstances.

Things reached such an impossible state with Violette's health that she consulted a doctor who discovered a tumor on her thyroid: He stated that its growth had been precipitated by tension. Violette realized that her body was giving her a clear signal, that the added pressures she was experiencing at school were literally killing her. In an effort to save her own life and sanity she retired from teaching.

Retirement was good for Violette. Her life at this point was full and rich. In the company of her many friends, there were concerts and musicals and plays, midnight hikes on the state-park Fiery Gizzard trails to read poetry by candlelight, and foreign travels. Her interest in the events of the world around her are evidenced by her journal entries:

Three Russian cosmonauts were found dead in the return capsule after spending 24 days on the space station.

I recall a conversation with my nephew back in the 30s when we talked about possibilities of walking on the moon. I thought it was an absurd idea — how could we possibly overcome gravitational problems? I feel fortunate to have lived in this marvelous age of technology. If only mankind could get it through his numbskull that this knowledge should be used for the betterment of mankind.

With retirement under her belt, and a firm decision to disregard the treatment of the locals, Violette's life took an upward turn. She felt her strength returning. Friends and family continued to be a source of great joy for her.

Her daughter Virginia, with husband Ralph and their five children, had settled in Wisconsin. Virginia tells a wonderful story, heavily sprinkled with laughter, about one of their visits.

Virginia and family started out from Wisconsin for a trip to Florida. To accommodate their substantial belongings, Ralph built a rack on top of the station wagon, then an enclosed box to strap on above that, and finally topped off the whole conglomeration with a sailboat! They drove to Violette's to spend a couple of days before continuing on to Florida, and as they were preparing to leave, Ralph suggested that Violette accompany them on their vacation.

Hurried packing followed, and as they loaded into the jam-packed station wagon, Violette looked around at Fa-Fa and decided she simply couldn't leave him behind. So Fa was loaded into the car with the three adults, five children, and various and sundry supplies. Rumor has it that their majestic cruise through sleepy "downtown" Montecarlo was an event that caused wonder and gossip for the next five years.



There were many happy memories of treks between the two homes: Virginia in her Wisconsin north woods and Violette on her beloved Rock. When Violette was unable to make to visit her family in the north, the family came to Sunset Rock. Violette took all five grandchildren on nature hikes, taught them to identify flowers and wildlife, instilling in them her love of nature. Writes Deb (one of the grandchildren):

When we visited we kids slept in one room on the top floor, up a steep narrow flight of stairs. Just before dawn a tremendous racket'd awaken us. Through the open window which allowed every bird in the woods access to our defenseless unshielded ears, came the morning wake-up call, "I am here and I am I!" was the song of all

those millions of avians. The sound of it was beyond song, beyond melody; all of those delicate trills piled each upon each became a startlingly intense wall of sound, coming at us out of the barely lit sky outside our window. We crept out of our nest of quilts on the floor and leaned on the sill, trying to catch a glimpse of what was making all that noise. But it was too dark and besides, the birds had too many hiding places in the woods. Sometimes we'd catch a flirt of wings in our peripheral vision, or a leafy springboard rustling, the diver already gone. And all the time that screeching, shrieking, and shrilling! After a half-hour or so, when the sky began to lighten definitely, the birds quieted down somewhat and we could go back to sleep.

Violette's strength had returned in such force that when faced with the disappointment of a dry well, she expressed her courage and good spirits once again.

A problem arose in the water supply from the well that we had drilled shortly after purchasing the property. It did not yield copiously even from the beginning but we had hoped it would provide adequately for our use. I soon discovered that any average demand would exhaust the supply. The well was determined a "dry hole." I dreamed of a hookup with the town, but during the interim, I could catch rainwater for general use and bring in what was necessary for cooking and personal use.

The "interim" lasted six years!

In 1972, when Violette was 65 years old, there was a momentous event in her life, something that would set her feet on a different path and open doors for her into the world of the arts where she had always longed to be.

Monty Wanamaker returns to Tennessee! This is the beginning of a friendship that will lead to numerous changes in my lifestyle. His career as an artist will entail us contacts in artistic fields that would have been denied me under ordinary circumstances.



For over 20 years, Violette's platonic friendship with Monty provided a mainstay in her life. Even today, three years after her death, when Monty speaks of Violette it is with many pauses to regain his composure.

For 20 years they had morning coffee together, ate their dinner meal together, discussed all aspects of

their lives, offered each other encouragement and support — they were best friends.

After much deliberation, Violette sold a plot of her prime bluff property to Monty to build his studio/home. The land was located about one-quarter of a mile along the bluff from her house. Doing most of the work by hand, she pitched in to help him clear a path for a roadway through the woods, then made a clearing for the building site. Monty had bought an old house in the valley (for \$600) to be recycled into his studio/dwelling. When the wreckers carefully removed the siding they found the original log structure underneath. This was an exhilarating windfall — Monty had dreamed of having a log house in keeping with his affinity for nature. There were two fireplaces made of handmade bricks which he later incorporated into plant boxes next to the fireplace. The stones from the dismantled fireplaces were strewn about, and she and Monty went later to gather them for use in the reconstruction. The rafters, joists and paneling were of the finest old lumber.

Reconstruction of the old log house was an absorbing procedure. Monty had engaged a mountain-man builder, Gordon Childers, to disassemble it. Each log was numbered and coded, then brought to the building site for exacting reconstruction. Another woodsman brought his rusty, decrepit-looking hoist to lift the logs into place — the "raisin," as it was called. Violette helped Monty chink the logs while Childers cut shake shingles from white oaks found on the premises. These hand-hewn shingles make a roof that is leak proof.

The fashioning of the shingles was a fascinating innovation for me as I saw the use of tools invented by early settlers who used available resources to make shelter for themselves. Working in this atmosphere of originality was a stimulating venture for me as I felt in touch with creative resourcefulness that has been gradually replaced with robot-like mechanical devices. People in the community viewed us with interesting confusion.

In March of that eventful year Violette was awakened at 4:00 am by her faithful dog, Fa. To her amazement she realized there was nowhere for him to sit or lie down — the entire floor was flooded with about an inch of water! Further investigation found rugs floating while water poured in like a spigot from a wall outlet. Rather than view this mishap as misfortune, Violette's view is quite enchanting.

Amazing event! That one could be flooded here on the mountaintop. Later I was to experience a spring bubbling through in the closet corner of the bedroom!

Later in 1972, ten years after Ray's death, Violette wrote that she spent the month of October clearing brush, raking and trimming below the bluff at The

Rock, perhaps with some feeling of premonition. On October 28th at seven in the morning she received an alarming phone call — there was a forest fire raging below The Rock and it was spreading fast. In a panic she called Monty, and their investigation revealed that flames had climbed up as far as The Rock in a line along the bluff and were moving toward both homes. With help from the volunteer fire department and forest-fire fighters, they were finally able to bring the blaze under control. But Violette was to find that her fight with fire on the mountain was not over.

Halloween. At 1:00 am Fa wakens me with urgency to be let out of the house. He is disturbed and goes toward The Rock. His bark is a signal of distress and I follow him to see what he is trying to tell me — at the edge of the bluff I look down and see the entire roadside is on fire."

The fire was of such magnitude that the fire fighters worked all night and well into the next day getting it under control. Violette threw every inch of her 5'6" frame into the fight — beating at the flames with blankets, tossing debris away from the fire, and clearing a firebreak with hand tools. This time everything was burned on the bluff side of her premises including the area directly below the Rock.



Two days later an urgent call came in — another fire was burning in the woods just below Monty's place! By the time they got to the bluff the flames were only ten feet from his house, and were spreading rapidly.

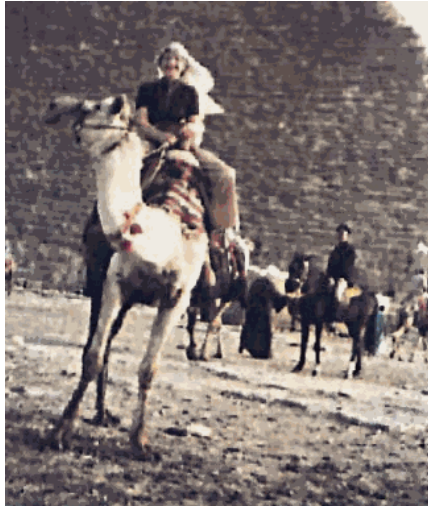
Monty tells the story of how, believing his home to be lost to the inferno, he rushed to cram every single thing he owned into his small car. As he raced out the same dirt road so often closed by the Assembly, he met Gordon Childers astride his trusty bulldozer, heading straight toward the fire.

Together they returned to battle the fire, with Childers frantically roaring up and down the bluff's edge on his 'dozer, clearing a firebreak. The situation seemed hopeless.

There was no way we could save the house. Up to now I had contained my emotion over the whole distressing aspect of the week. This moment was too much. "Dear God," I cried, "Help us." At the very moment of this distress call the wind switched directions to blow the flames away from Monty's house.

Violette had escaped the wrath of the forest fires, but the police later determined that the fires were caused by another kind of wrath: They were set by an arsonist in an effort to drive out Violette and Monty. Following up on a tip, the police were able to capture the fire-starter, and he was jailed. Once again Violette had faced the mountain's challenge and won.

This is part four, final chapter in the biography of Violette Wakeland. Please refer to ACR archives for parts I, II and III. kc



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Part IV: Coming Full Circle

Having bested the perils of mountain life, and having made the decision to be herself and not take on the attitudes of the locals, Violette embarked on a new phase of life: she began to travel the world. As well as her activities within the United States and Canada, her memoirs describe trips to Nova Scotia, Russia, India, China, East and West Berlin, when The Wall was still standing.

During one of her travels Violette phoned home to neighbors to inquire about her house. To her dismay she heard that her place had been burglarized! She rushed back home from her trip to find that the thieves had literally *lived* in her house during her absence, leisurely carrying away her possessions one at a time. The crooks included her wheelbarrow in their loot, and it was by this means that she was able to later identify them and carry out prosecution. Despite that negative incident Violette continued her love affair with nature, good and bad.

Living within nature is not without immediate hazards. Encounters with the belligerent little yellow jackets is a case in point. Fa and I were swingblading weeds when suddenly I invaded a yellow-jacket nest. An immediate defense surrounded me bodily. They were in my hair, in my clothing, in stinging cloying persistence. I swung my hat, flailed my arms, stamped my feet — nothing could rid me of their attack. Finally I was able to beat myself free (maybe they had divested themselves of their stingers.) I literally bathed myself in ammonia, then settled in for a siege of recovery. (Of late years scientists have learned that insect venom is an effective antidote against arthritis. Maybe I was lucky.)

After ten years of companionship, having literally saved her life more than once, Violette's companion Fa died.

I was deeply saddened over his loss. It was January and my friends on the bluff were around. We dug his grave and we all gave him a dignified interment under the pines. A limestone slab marks his burial site.

When she regained her strength following the loss of her dog, Violette turned her attention to writing and began to keep a journal in earnest.

My interest in literature had been an invaluable means of gaining insight into the myriad complexities and intricacies of human nature. My writing took on the nature of putting my life into perspective, which finally proved to be a healing of the psyche.

She would need every bit of that mature perspective to continue her ongoing battle with The Assembly.

One spring we had a season of persistent rainfall until a certain narrow stretch in the road became so water logged that the bottom dropped out. I was grounded except for my two legs. A time or two I attempted to get through with the car; each time it dropped to a standstill. There came a time when I had to walk to town for food.



The road situation had continued to be a thorn in her flesh over many years. At long last, after years of standing tall, Violette appeared in court to state her case against The Assembly. Surprisingly the judge ruled in Violette's favor. Because The Assembly was a religious organization, and few cases are ever won against such, this became a landmark case. Never again would she be shut off from her land; never again could The Assembly torture her in hopes of winning her property — she had won!

During these years Violette had formed a friendship with Glenn and Betty King, who later purchased Monty's cabin. Today Virginia expresses her relief that her mother had such kind and generous-hearted neighbors to look after her. They were ever-present in Violette's life and shared many similar interests. Violette returned their kindness: When Betty became ill and had radical surgery, Violette nursed her at Sunset Bluff until she was stronger.



Violette had also continued to develop a wonderful camaraderie with Sanford McGee, a former student of hers and a biology teacher at St. Andrews School-Sewanee School in nearby Sewanee, Tennessee. He and Violette cooked up the idea to build a rental cottage on the lot adjacent to Violette's. In 1975, when she was 68 years old, she found an old

house in the valley that could be recycled. This plan fit in well with what Sanford envisioned—that the place would be rustic with the homey features of early cabins, much like his grandmother's house. Together they stripped paint from aged window frames and doors, pulled nails from the old lumber, put creosote on the joists, hauled building supplies, and generally lent a hand to builder Gordon Childers, the same man who helped Monty reassemble his house, and who came to their aid during the week of the fires. Sanford's creativity is evident in the cottage: he hauled enough rocks from his family home to build a stone wall behind the fireplace, cleverly positioning jutting rock as window sills. He bought salvage windows for the home and designed the cottage around the window placement, allowing for an incredible view through the sliding glass doors to the deck. The interior walls are cedar shake shingle, and above the stairs he inserted a stained-glass window. In March of 1976, Sanford moved into the cottage. Violette was 69 years old.

One of Sanford's first deeds as a resident was to convince Violette that it was time to drill a well. Sanford's father was a dowser, a water finder or "water witch." Dowsing is an ancient skill, often passed down in families from generation to generation. Undaunted by the history of dry hits, Sanford was typically optimistic and brought his father to look for a suitable location for a well. Together they slowly walked the property foot by foot, looking for a spot—each relying on different skills. While Sanford's father "used his body" as a finding stick, Sanford employed a more scientific method by studying the lay of the land and deducing where the largest watershed would be located. When Sanford led his father to the spot where he suspected there would be an underground reservoir, his father circled and circled the spot in smaller spirals until he stopped and said, "We drill here." It was an exciting and nerve-wracking experience for Violette:

I'm rather dreading this drilling project — I've dreaded it for years. That's why I've been carrying water for these six years. Now I'm being pushed into it by circumstances somewhat beyond my control. Destiny?

The well-driller began his work today. It's an exciting time but I'm nervously apprehensive — making a strike is one big gamble. I am so tense that I can't go near the operation!

One of the great days of my life!! A driller calls for the pump man to come out to test the stream. With the hose on full, the water continues for an hour without letup! "I think you have a hit!" says the pump man. I run behind the house and burst into tears. Ever since I've lived here water has been a problem. Can it be that at long last I will be able to turn on the tap and get returns?

Sanford says that on the day of the "hit," he and Violette danced in the pumping fountain, filled champagne glasses with the delicious nectar and drank a toast.



Violette continued her education throughout her life. When she was 79, she was initiated into *Elderhostel*, an educational program for older adults who want to continue to expand their horizons and develop new interests and enthusiasms. Participants enjoy inexpensive short-term academic programs at educational institutions around the world.

It is for elder people on the move, not just for travel but in terms of intellectual activity as well.

One field trip was to Dayton, Tennessee, where the famous Scopes "monkey trial" was held.

Her memoirs continue to be full of other historical references:

Moon shot Apollo13 has difficulty interlocking with the lunar module.

Our nation's unfortunate involvement in Vietnam served one worthy purpose: the realization that wars are the epitome of stupidity.

March 30, 1981: An assassination attempt is made on President Reagan and press secretary Jim Brady. The assailant, John Hinckley, is from an affluent family. His motive as to impress the actress with whom he was infatuated.

The space shuttle Columbia is launched successfully.

The year that Violette turned 80, fires once again broke out on the mountain during the drought season. She reports seeing two large wood fires in the valley one day, getting a call about two others the next day, and being shut off from ingress to her property on another day due to the severity of the outbreaks. Although the rash of fires continued throughout the dry fall, this time Violette was not required to get into the trenches with the firefighters. Modernization had equipped the volunteer fire department with better tools to fight the fires.

Violette was a one-of-a-kind woman. Nothing can better describe her zest for life than her own words:

Adjustments are the spice of life.

The nature of mankind is body, mind, soul and spirit. All of these factors should enter into our judgements especially pertaining to human relationships. Unless there is correlation of all of these elements in our nature, judgements can be seriously flawed. Intellect without guidance is not a guarantee of sound judgement.

Every day I give thanks to be with young people, and I have a vibrant spirit of LIVING. Every year that is given to me I hope will be a time of learning.

On a camping trip, at age 75, to Cosby campground in the Smokies she says: The mountains are soaked but I'm determined to hike the five and a half miles up Mount Cammerer. Everybody else in the group is so slow!

One of Sanford's hens had sequestered herself to brood in a box on the porch of the cottage. Little chicks were hatching and I was apprehensive about varmints getting those little cheeps so I became a surrogate mother to eight delightful chicks. They followed me as their mother hen even though I didn't exactly cluck and peck like a feathered fowl.

In August 1983 I purchased my first color TV for \$379. It takes me a while to catch up with modern technology. Olympic winter games were being conducted at Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, in February, which gave me fascinating TV viewing for two weeks.

Strange little incidents occur here on the bluff from time to time. This one occurred on a spring day in March. An unfamiliar family came with a request: did I mind if they

scattered Grandpa's ashes off The Rock? What was the nature of the affinity that Grandpa had for this place? Were there special soul-filling moments of meditation on the Rock? Whatever his motivation, Grandpa wished to be assimilated forever with this spot. I have read legends about twining roses springing up from the gravesites of two lovers side by side. In the spring, I look at a special dogwood blooming there in its ethereal glory below the Rock and I wonder.



When Violette was 90 years old she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. During the two years that she lingered she was able to see her final dream fulfilled: Virginia and Ralph completed the construction of her dream house by building on top of Violette's basement home. Just days prior to her death, Virginia and Ralph carried her upstairs to see the finished product.

Violette died on March 7, 1998. She faced death the same way she faced life: *I see threads running through my life which might give a clue to what we call destiny. I see many wiggle-waggles in the threads of life with points of stress indicating dangers overcome; there are shimmerings of silver with touches of happiness; in these late years the shimmerings have become golden as the threads come together in one strand. Related to it all is The Rock, that sequestered prominence where I retreated to ponder what life was all about. In 1952, when Ray brought me to view this property, there was The Rock, that significant feature which seemed to symbolize the basis of my life. Almost 40 years later, The Rock is still central in my life. I have come full circle.*



Epilogue:

- Today Virginia and Ralph live in their finished home on Sunset Bluff. Both are active in community life, and Ralph is an artist in several mediums.
- Monty Wanamaker owns an incredible emporium in McMinnville, Tennessee, called Arts and Antiques. His own work appears in galleries from Chattanooga to New York City. He lives in a cottage with attached studio that he built with his own hands.
- Sanford lives on a land trust in Sewanee, Tennessee, in a magical home he designed and built himself. He is a practicing artist, exhibiting his work in various places. He states, "It is my legacy from Violette."

- **The author lives in the cottage next to Sunset Rock.**