

By GEORGE ROBERTSON, M.D.

Since the temperature was soaring about 100 degrees every day, I decided to find some cooler weather in the mountains.

I had a couple of days off so my wife and I chose the bike ride near Damascus, Va., called the Virginia Creeper Trail. The name comes not from the five-leaved plant also found in the area but from the action of the trains that once used the railroad bed where we would be biking.

The gradual uphill (about 2 degrees) climb meant that the trains would slowly make their way out of the valley with their loads of minerals or wood, creeping along the uphill trail at a few miles per hour up Rogers Mountain.

The train had long since been decommissioned and now the railroad bed and trestles served as the bikeway where a rider could get out at the White Mountain Station and then coast the 20 miles back into Damascus to the bike rental shop.

We woke up the morning of the adventure to thunder and lightning, but I was determined to make the ride anyway having already driven six hours just to get there. Linda opted out of the activity but drove me and my rental bike to the top of the mountain.

By the time we reached the starting point the rain was slowing down and I put on my \$1 plastic poncho and began the descent, realizing that it was in a remote location and I might be the only one on the trail, which did give me some pause. But as soon as I started away from the roadside and entered the forest surroundings, I was greeted with the most beautiful hedge of Rhododendron plants lining both sides of the thruway. It was as if I were in a virtual hall of white and pink flowers. I saw blackberry vines along the way and noticed the ripe fruit which made me know that if worst came to worst I could live off of their fruit until help came or I made it back to

civilization.

The light patter of rain on the exposed areas of my arms and legs made for the cooling I had come to the mountains to enjoy. At over 3,000 feet I had seen the outside temperature drop from 68 at the bottom to 64 degrees and rain at the top. The highest trestle bridge put me even with the treetops, and I watched the low clouds sifting among the trees, their leaves glistening with the steady stream of moisture from the gray ceiling above.

About an hour into the ride I stopped at the Appalachian Trail Crossing and walked a few feet into the tree cover but was immediately greeted by a swarm of gnats. They circled my eyes, getting into my ears which made me hurry back to the bicycle where I could get up the speed to leave the pesky insects behind.

The clear mountain stream accompanied me down the incline and went roaring over 7-foot falls, its flow encouraged by the light rain downpour. My altitude was now 2,400 feet and the rain was stopping so that I could warm up in the clearings where the trestle breached a gap between the hills and there was an occasional ray of sun.

Camping sites near the bottom of the river valley were mostly deserted, but there was an occasional tent which appeared empty and was probably put up in anticipation of a weekend trip.

Having come this time in late spring, seasonal flowers were almost gone and the bird songs were muted by the gray clouds and slight downpour. I did recognize a banded kingfisher and a Carolina Wren.