



Lost in the ‘Land of a Thousand Waterfalls’

The story of my four days and three
nights in the Sipsev Wilderness and
ultimate rescue.

By Sid Burgess

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Photo by Lane Leopard

I“In my 24 years in the sheriff’s office,” says Winston County (Alabama) chief deputy sheriff Bryan Kirkpatrick, “we’ve always found a lost hiker on the first day, surely by the second day. It is still unthinkable for us to have had someone out there for more than 72 hours.”

I would prove to be the “unthinkable” when I lost my way in the Sipsey Wilderness of the Bankhead National Forest in northwest Alabama for four days and three dark, cold, wet nights. In April of 2019. What follows is my account.

FIRST DAY

Saturday, April 6, seemed to me like a well-planned day. It was clear on my calendar. A friend and clergy colleague, Ed Hurley, had earlier asked to join me in hiking on some of the trails in the Sipsey Wilderness, “The Land of a Thousand Waterfalls,” in the Bankhead National Forest.

I first hiked in the Sipsey some 40 years ago. At that time, you could drive forest roads to within a couple of miles of the “Big Tree,” a 500-year-old yellow poplar, approximately 150 feet tall, that takes at least six adults with outstretched arms to encircle. Since then, the Sipsey has been designated a Wilderness Area. Now the closest approach to the “Big Tree” is a long drive on unpaved U.S. Forest Service roads and an eight-mile, round-trip hike on wilderness trails.

While “The Big Tree” remains a popular destination in the Forest, the Sipsey is better known for its waterfalls.

The waterfalls flow from layers of limestone and sandstone that make up the lower elevations of the Warrior Mountains on the southern edge of the Cumberland Plateau. Falls are especially numerous and strong during the winter and early spring rainy season.

So, to introduce Ed to the Sipsey, our first hike had to be to a waterfall. And I happened upon what I considered a likely destination: White Creek Falls, which is shown in the stunning photography on page 1 by

Lane Leopard. From my desktop computer at home, I had studied several Sipsey trails via AllTrails.com and found that White Creek Falls appeared to be accessible: “a 5.8 mile moderately trafficked, ‘loop trail’ located near Double Springs, Alabama, that features a waterfall and is rated as moderate.” Though I had never done this trail it looked easy enough. The trailhead was on paved Cranal Road (County Rd 60), on the southern edge of the Wilderness, with which I was familiar from earlier Sipsey hikes.



Ed and I set a date of April 12th for our first hike, but since I was free on the morning of April 6th, I decided to scout this trail on my own. With an early start, the hike looked short enough that I could even squeeze in a visit with my sister in Jasper and still make it back to Birmingham in time to watch the NCAA Final Four game (featuring Auburn vs. VA) with my wife, Melissa, at 5:00 pm.

I felt well-prepared. I had a digitized version of the map on my phone, plus a print-out. I had a backpack with a water reservoir; an energy drink; two energy bars and some trail mix. I would also have emergency gear that included a whistle and a small flashlight, both said to be effective for up to one mile, plus some matches. The forecast had temperatures in the 60’s, so I was wearing Carhart overalls, a long-sleeved shirt, a broad-brimmed, waterproof hat, and in my pack was a rain vest.

What I did not have — and this was crucial — was a

partner. I was venturing out alone, as I had often done on prior hikes. The big difference was I would be hiking in a national wilderness area. As I later learned, all wilderness hikers should have at least one partner. In local, state, and national parks, you can almost always be assured of contact with others should you need help. Not so in wilderness areas. In addition, when hiking in a national wilderness, one should always be prepared to spend the night, in the event of injury, illness, or getting lost. I was not.

But I was surely excited about my little adventure. I awoke early and took off at 4:00 am, leaving wife Melissa a very brief note advising her that I had not taken our dog Jazz for her morning stroll and suggesting she check the calendar on my computer to see my destination. I stopped for breakfast along the way and was at the Randolph trailhead northeast of Double Springs for a 7:00 a.m. start. I assumed this would give me plenty of time to complete the six-mile hike and be back in Jasper by mid-day. To say that things did not work out this way is the understatement of the year, and quite nearly, of a lifetime.

Setting out from the Randolph Trailhead I quickly found a directional sign for trail #201 to White Fall., Soon thereafter I reached a deep gully with no signage. I found a way across the gully and the wide stream at its center, but after walking several hundred yards on the far side, I decided I must be off track. So, I doubled back, re-crossed the gully, and headed upstream. By now it was getting on to mid-morning. I soon found the lovely White Falls, dropping some 50 to 70 feet from White Creek.

Already there was the Leopard family of Athens, AL, Lane and wife Jessica, and their two daughters, Addison and Emerson. (Don't blame Lane for this family photo; I took it.)

At White Creek Falls, Lane took this snapshot of me. I call it "Before the Fall," before my descent into depths of the wilderness. (The photo shows how ill-clad I was. Imagine those heavy overalls in the soaking rains to come!) I'm staring down at my signal-starved, soon to be battery-dead phone.

The Leopards, Sipsey regulars, told me of the upper White Falls, though they cautioned climbing up to them could be a bit dangerous. The Leopards were headed back in the opposite direction and we did not cross paths again. Thrilled to be in the heart of the wilderness, I completely lost all track of time. I hiked in



The "Big Tree," a 500-year-old Yellow Poplar, in the Sipsey Wilderness. (Photo by Michelle Pendleton, Friends of the Sipsey)

behind the lower White Falls and began a hand-over-hand ascent to the upper falls.

It took a bit of belly crawling, but I reached the upper falls (shown below) soon enough and took more than my share of photographs. Then I began looking for what the AllTrails map showed would be trail #202 leading back to the trailhead.

I never found trail #202.

Only later, much later, did I learn that the loop shown on AllTrails.com was terribly, entirely misleading. (Note: Back in 2019, the AllTrails version I was using showed the White Falls hike as a loop, out on trail 201 and back to the trailhead on 202. It is now depicted as "out-and-back" route on trail 201 alone. Unfortunately, I had only the 2019 version.)

Why did I not simply retrace my steps via trail #201 when I did not immediately find trail #202? In retro-



The Leopard family of Athens, AL, Lane and wife Jessica, and their two daughters, Addison and Emerson.

spect, that surely would have been the wise thing to do. But having hiked the Wilderness before, I had experience hunting for trails, and in my scrambled mind, trail #202 offered much quicker access back to the trailhead. By the time I realized I was in trouble, I was miles away from trail #201 and would likely have never found it again.

By midafternoon, my cell phone was completely dead. I had missed the visit with my sister in Jasper and the start time for the telecast of NCAA Final Four was fast approaching. During that long day I had eaten the two energy bars I had brought with me and drunk from the water reservoir in my backpack. As darkness fell, I kept on walking long-abandoned logging roads, looking for a way out. Seeking help, I periodically blew my whistle and flicking my single-battery flashlight.

Later I learned that back home Melissa was pacing the floor. She had

learned from my sister, Marthanne, that I had missed the midday stopover in Jasper. Melissa tried my cell phone repeatedly and had gotten no response. She checked AllTrails.com and found the trailhead was in Winston County. She reached a dispatcher at the sheriff's office who said she would send a deputy to look for my car at the trailhead. The first report came back that my car was not at the trailhead. By early evening Melissa had sheriff patrols in three North Alabama counties looking for my car.

FIRST NIGHT

Unfortunately, I was nowhere near my car, or any road that a sheriff's car could travel. All night long I walked, searching for a trail. Prior to its designation as a National Wilderness (1975) much of the Sipsey had been heavily logged. Abandoned logging roads make navigation in the forest challenging for two reasons. They can easily obscure a foot-trail, and they tend to lead away from the most challenging — and beautiful — terrain where one is more likely to pick up a popular trail. (Ah, hindsight!)

Throughout the night I stopped walking only to sit and rest a few times. It was pitch dark and a light rain was falling. People ask if I was afraid. No, I was too embarrassed for getting lost, and too worried about the anguish I must be causing Melissa. Plus, I was confident that come daylight I would find that elusive way out.

Back home, as afternoon turned to evening, Melissa had contacted our daughters: Brittany and husband Aaron Feld in Eugene, Oregon; and Grace, coaching at a huge, juniors volleyball tournament at the Georgia World Congress Center in Atlanta.

When Grace's fellow coaches realized there was a crisis at home, they rallied to her aid. They got her from the GWCC to the hotel and to her car and, made arrangements to coach her team through the remainder of the tournament, which was to continue through the following day. Once Grace realized Melissa was alone, she called Hilda Handley, her partner, and her cousin, Lizzie Holt, and asked them both to go to Melissa's side. When she got off work, Melissa's sister, Sandra "Red" Holt, joined them. Melissa found our



Sid at White Creek Falls on Trail #201. (Photo by Lane Leopard)



Upper White Falls. (Photo by Lane Leopard)

pastor, Joe Genau, Saturday night at a retreat for college students and he left immediately to be with her.

Brittany and Aaron followed news from Birmingham, which was that Winston County first reported that my car was not at the trailhead; then, that it was at the trailhead, with a hot hood. They suggested that perhaps I had met some friends and decided to camp out for the night, which had required a run into town for camping gear. The home front didn't buy this theory, so Hilda and Lizzie decided to make their own late-night run to the Randolph trail head and commence a night-time search. En route, they stopped to buy dry clothes and food for me, knowing I would be wet and hungry when I finally emerged from the woods. They also purchased flashlights and rain gear for themselves, as they were determined to go into the forest to look for me.

Those two courageous young women spent a couple of hours in the pitch-dark, pouring rain, looking for me, deep in the forest. Then Lizzie and Hilda waited in their car, sitting in wet clothes, until daylight, when they left the trailhead in search of dry clothing, dry shoes, and some food. They returned to the trailhead

about 7:15 a.m. to find that searchers were already assembling.

SECOND DAY

Winston County Chief Deputy Sheriff Brian Sheriff Kirkpatrick was at the trailhead by 8:00 Sunday, organizing rescue workers from three local volunteer fire departments into teams: Ashridge and Pebble from Haleyville, and Central from Florence. By 9:00 he had deployed 14 volunteers into the forest. Hilda and Lizzie tried to join, but the sheriff would not allow anyone unfamiliar with forest terrain to participate for fear of having another person lost. Sheriff Kirkpatrick sought help from the Alabama State Patrol's search and rescue unit, but bad weather in Montgomery had their helicopter grounded. He then called the City of Cullman PD and asked for help from their helicopter unit, which was in the air by midday.

Sunday morning was church time and several churches were praying for my safe return. At my home Church during the morning worship service, Pastor



Winston County Chief Deputy Sheriff Brian Sheriff Kirkpatrick.

Joe was checking text messages during the hymns to keep the Edgewood congregation informed.

From Oregon, Brittany and Aaron were desperately trying to get drones into the air over the forest but were meeting resistance from the Forest Service due to Wilderness regulations.

Back in the Sipsey, I was still wandering. About mid-morning on Sunday I came upon what, for the Wilderness, was a relatively clear area. I saw evidence that earlier hikers had once fashioned a “lean-to” and had built a fire pit. I decided this was visible place to stop for some badly needed rest. I still had some water in my backpack reservoir and a small bag of trail mix. I rationed myself a bit of each and set about trying to organize a camp. But then came rain and I retreated to the cover of the forest. I went back and forth from forest to clearing as the rain came and went, all the while blowing my whistle at 15-minute intervals.

At one point I thought I heard voices. I dashed in that direction, hollering and blowing my whistle, but got no response. About mid-day I heard a helicopter. I was astonished that someone had taken to the air to look for me — at least, I assumed they were looking for me! I made for the clearing and arranged my limited resources for maximum visibility. When the helicopter came into sight, I went into a celebratory dance routine, furiously waving my brightly colored hat. The Cullman PD helicopter circled several times and I was convinced I had been spotted. When the ‘chopper flew away, I packed up my gear and prepared for the coming rescue.

I waited and waited. I walked about the clearing for a couple of hours, blowing my whistle to aid my

rescuers. I imagined my daughter, Grace, and maybe a couple of her buddies, making their way toward me wearing nothing more on their feet than sneakers. Finally, I decided I’d better get moving in the direction the helicopter had flown. Once again, I found myself on ancient, dead-end logging roads, getting nowhere.

But Grace was indeed on her way. She had patiently sat by the phone with Melissa and Pastor Joe all Sunday afternoon, as Sheriff Kirkpatrick had requested. But late in the day, when his office called to say they were sending someone to get a bag of my dirty clothes for use by search dogs on Monday morning, Grace said, “No thank you, I’m on my way.” (Ominously, the Sheriff also asked if I had had any known enemies.)

Grace arrived at the trailhead just as the sheriff was pulling the search teams out for the day due to incoming rainstorms. And Grace was not the only one who couldn’t sit still: daughter Brittany was making plans on Sunday to fly to Birmingham early on Monday. Through the Internet, Brittany also tracked down Lane Leopard from pictures he had posted of White Falls. She learned that the Leopards had seen me at the Falls. She put them in touch with Sheriff Kirkpatrick. They eventually took off work and joined the search.



(Photo by Decatur Daily)

SECOND NIGHT

Of course, I did not have access to a weather report, but when it became obvious that I was going to spend another night in the wild, I stopped to make camp, having by this time gone more than 40 hours without sleep. I found a likely spot to spend the night near a stream with large boulders that I could use as a brace for a lean-to. I dragged a couple of good-sized, fallen limbs up to frame my little structure. Using my pocketknife, I cut branches from evergreen trees to form a cover.

I built a fire using matches long stored in my backpack, but in the process ripped off the strike plate from

the match case. My fire created quite a lot of smoke, which I thought was a good thing. Perhaps someone would see it! As it began to rain, I crawled into my make-do shelter. With dirt for a mattress, my vest for cover, and my backpack as my pillow, I fell asleep.

Back at the trailhead, the search teams were leaving but Grace, Hilda, and Lizzie were staying, hoping against hope that I would be coming out. They were there as several free-lance volunteers came and went, determined to continue the search into the night. The young women stayed until about 2:00 a.m., when a Forest Ranger convinced them he would be there through the night to summon help if I were to be found.

When I awoke in the wee hours of the morning of what would be the third day, rain had doused my fire and soaked my exposed pant legs. I crouched deeper into my lean-to and began the long, lonely wait for dawn. Once again, was I afraid? No, I was miserable: wet, cold, dirty, bored, still ashamed for getting lost. Had danger presented itself, I probably would have initially welcomed the distraction!

THIRD DAY

When light finally emerged, I got moving again. In hindsight, I should have stayed put, perhaps improved my improvised shelter, and allowed my soaked pant legs to dry out some. I'm told that scores of volunteers and forest service personnel were at the trailhead early on Monday morning, being deployed into teams by Sheriff Kirkpatrick. Unfortunately, I was walking away from them. By the middle of this rain-soaked day, I had reached a spot high above what I recognized as the entrance into Bee Branch, home to the Big Tree. I considered finding a way down to that entrance, where I could pick up a trail that would take me to a parking lot only four miles away. But I also knew that would be taking me in the opposite direction of White Falls and the Randolph Trailhead. On a rainy Monday I thought it unlikely I would find help in that remote parking lot. So, I turned around and headed back in the direction from which I had come.

By mid-day on Monday wife Melissa and daughter Brittany were at the trailhead search site. Brittany had just flown in from Oregon. Seeing my car and evidence of all the rescue efforts underway, Grace reports the two were overcome with emotion. They were accompanied by our pastor, Joe Genau, who would be a



(From The Moulton Advertiser via Sipsey Wilderness Hiking Club)

steady presence at the search site for the duration. And Brittany had work to do. She and husband Aaron, back in Eugene, Oregon, were still trying to get heat-seeking drones into the forest.

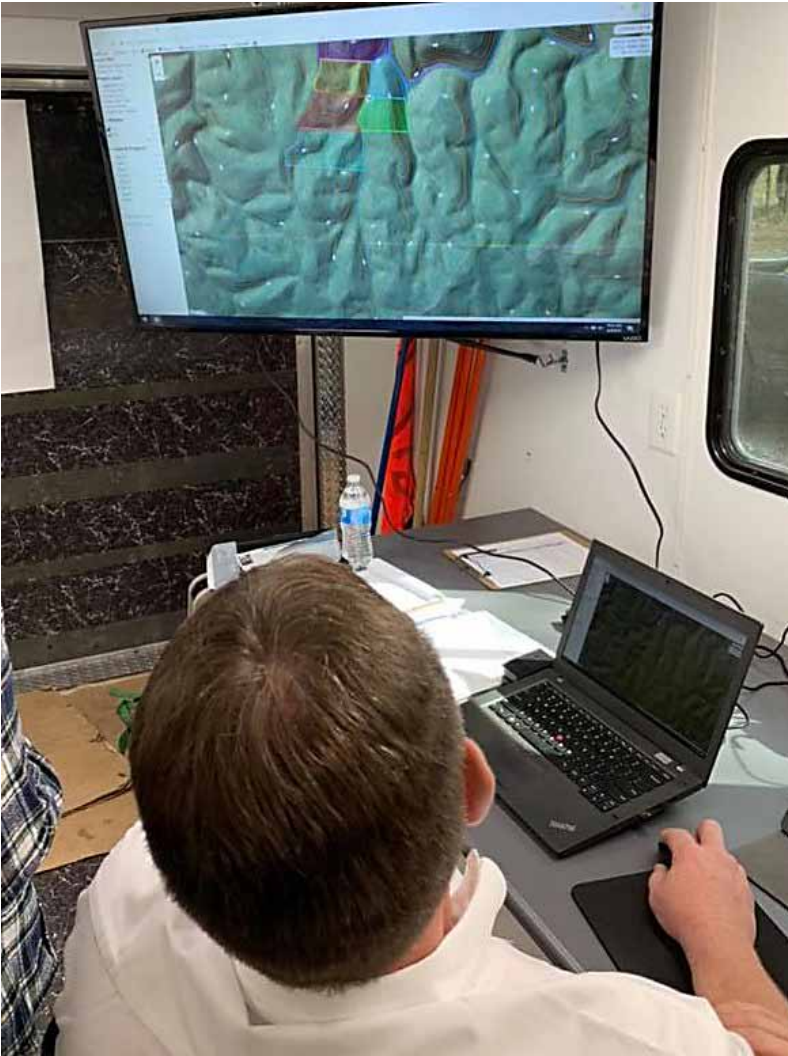
But “the rain kept a tumblin’ down.” According to search volunteer Janice Barrett of Wild South, Sheriff Kirkpatrick was forced to call off the search at about 2:00 because more storms were in the forecast, along with a tornado watch.

“Sorry we had to leave you with that going on,” she says. “It was not easy to leave knowing you were still out there.”

Several intrepid searchers sneaked around the sheriff and ventured into the forest that afternoon on their own, including long-time friend and former church member (and former Army Ranger) Scott Serotta.

And, once again, the young women, Grace, Hilda, and Lizzie, now joined by Brittany, had staked their claim on space at the trailhead and stayed until late night on the off-chance I might emerge from the forest on my own.

Among the volunteers who arrived on Monday was a Mennonite Rapid Response Search and Rescue team from Tennessee. They had been alerted by a couple of their members who live in nearby Hartselle and are deer hunters in the area. The team asked for and received permission from the Forest Service to join the rescue efforts. The Tennessee group is affiliated with Mennonite Christian Aid Ministries, which has about a dozen of these rapid response teams located around the country. Each is composed of dedicated individuals who volunteer their time and expertise to assist local emergency services in finding the lost and missing. The Tennessee team brought its own command trailer equipped with computers, mapping software, GPS



The command trailer of the Mennonite Rapid Response Search and Rescue team from Tennessee.

units, and communications system (handheld radios and repeater), which quickly became command central for Tuesday's search.

(One of the Mennonite volunteers went a short distance down the trail on Monday and came hurrying back to report within earshot of my daughters, "It was like walking on water, with snakes slithering below the surface.")

Back in the forest, I was soaking wet and looking for a dry spot. I eventually found one on a rocky ledge with some lightly cascading waterfalls. I crossed a stream, climbed some rocks, and crawled under the ledge until I found dry ground. I gathered what dry scraps of wood I could find and tried to start a fire. I had a few dry matches but no striker plate. I tried striking the matches against the driest rock I could find but had no luck. I then turned my attention to filling my water reservoir from the waterfalls cascading over the ledge. I stayed and rested there for an hour or two and took a few bites of my remaining trail mix.

Soon I realized that if someone were looking for

me, I was too well hidden to be found. By now, I was well beyond the embarrassment of getting lost. I was just eager to be rescued.

I slowly began to move again, out from under the ledge and into the rain. My wide-brimmed hiking hat was waterproof and I had a light rain vest, but once again the legs of my heavy overalls got soaked. When I checked to see why my knees were hurting, I found that the overalls had rubbed them raw.

THIRD NIGHT

Except for that brief rest on the rock ledge, I walked again from daylight into darkness, blowing my whistle and flashing my light. By early evening on Monday I was exhausted. I climbed halfway up a hillside and collapsed under an evergreen tree for shelter — a second night with dirt for a mattress. I must have slept a few hours, but I awoke around one or two am, soaking wet and freezing cold, and facing a long, lonely wait until dawn.

According to the NWS temps that night never dropped below 60, but my teeth seemed to be chattering loudly enough to be heard about as far as my whistle could blow. At some time during the night I had taken off my hearing aids; now, in the dark, I began a frantic search for them. To my great relief I found both hearing aids and even more miraculously, fresh batteries in my backpack.



Caney Creek Falls Trail. (Photo by Justin Santarlasci)

FOURTH DAY

Slowly, ever so slowly, light began to appear rising above a far hillside. I fantasized Melissa and Grace's car lights were beaming toward me. I was thrilled! I would soon be found. But what I took to be car light was merely the sun beginning to rise, which I would later realize was a good thing because that meant dry weather.

It is impossible for me to fully comprehend the toll the past three days had taken on Melissa. Though she had the support of family, friends, and church, she was preparing herself for the worst possible news. She had my will and other end-of-life documents close at hand. By late Monday, she and Grace were convinced I was dead; Brittany was urging 'wait and see;' while, Hilda and Lizzie remained the optimists. Even so, this brave bunch was determined to be among the first on-hand at the trailhead on Tuesday morning, when the promise of clearing skies meant the search parties would be free to comb the wilderness looking for me.



Sunrise in the Sipsey Wilderness.

I'm told that what you see in the photograph below is just a slice of the scene at the Randolph Trailhead. Jeremy Wise, chief of the Haleyville Rescue Squad, told *The Northwest Alabamian*, "I've never seen such an outpouring of support from all over. I've never seen this many people in one spot for search and I've been doing this for 15 years."



This is just a slice of the scene at the Randolph Trailhead, where dozens of volunteers gathered to form search parties.

Grace reports that family members were concerned that there were too many “chiefs” among the “Indians.” However, Sheriff Kirkpatrick soon relieved them of that concern as he mounted a box and made it clear he was in charge and was there to organize the day’s search. He divided the throng into 24, 6-person teams, with each team having paramedics, rescue workers, and experienced hikers. The teams conducted a patterned search, spreading out so many feet apart as they walked over assigned quadrants of the rugged terrain.

Several teams from the North Alabama Search Dog Association participated in the search. They were the first teams to go in on Tuesday morning.

They were followed by trained mounted search and rescue units from Back Country Horsemen of Central Alabama, who utilized the 6.7-mile Sipsey River trail set aside for horse riders.

To prove how disorienting the forest can be, three of the volunteer rescuer workers got lost at different times during Tuesday’s search but were found within hours. One of the volunteer fire fighters became dehydrated and had to be taken by ambulance to the nearest emergency room.

As sunlight brightened the day, I reassessed my predicament. I could see what looked like another brushy clearing above me, but I didn’t think I had the strength to make the climb. Below me I could see the headwaters of a stream flowing into a ravine. I decided to follow it downstream as best I could. I had a few peanuts for breakfast and drank the last of my water before heading out. Following the cascading stream was slow going as I was determined to keep my feet as dry as possible. As the stream got stronger and faster, I had no hesitation cleaning and filling my water reservoir. I also lowered my overalls to make a fuller assessment of my knees. What I discovered were abrasions on my inner thighs and kneecaps that had been literally rubbed blood red.

It took about three hours for me to reach what I later learned was the Sipsey Fork of the Black Warrior River. There I spotted a tree leaning out over the water with its roots exposed.

The tree faced a bend in the river that gave me an open view to the sky, which was finally—day four—cleared of rain clouds. I could sit on the roots and hope for either a canoe or kayak coming down the rain-swollen river or perhaps a helicopter spotting me from the air.



Several teams from the North Alabama Search Dog Association participated in the search.



Trained mounted search and rescue units from Back Country Horsemen of Central Alabama also joined the search.

So, on Day 4 I did what I should have done on Day 1 or, surely, on Day 2. I stayed put. I had found a safe, visible spot. I sat tight and gave rescuers a chance to find me. Had I done that on Day 2 I’m certain I would

have been rescued then.

I did stand from my perch on the tree roots every 15 to 30 minutes to whistle and to shout for help. With my visible setting I was optimistic I would be found soon. Even so, I cast about along the shoreline for what might be a dry spot where I might spend yet another night. Far from giving up, I was also trying to imagine how I might reach such a spot with my bleeding knees. And I was counting out the number of remaining peanuts—15 as I recall—that I could ration myself for dinner and breakfast.

But then, about 1:00 pm, I heard a helicopter. I painfully rose from my “root recliner” and began furiously waving my hat. I had previously hung my brightly colored pack cover out over some of the exposed roots of my tree so I hoped that could be seen, too. This State Patrol helicopter circled several times. I later learned that on what was to have been their final pass, pilot Billy Randall says he spotted something out of the ordinary from the riverbank foliage. He reported this to the mobile command center at the Randolph Trailhead.

As the helicopter pulled away, all I could do in my deteriorated state was sit, wait, hope, and pray.

RESCUE

While the report from the State Trooper helicopter was not definitive enough to nail my exact location, it turns out that Search Team Six, led by Forest Service officer Paul Richards, began its search on Tuesday at the top of the very ravine I had followed down that morning. It took them a couple of hours to descend but what a relief it was when I heard someone call from across the stream, “Hello! Are you Sid Burgess?” That call came from Jacob Evans, a volunteer from Cookeville, Tennessee, working with the Tennessee unit of the Mennonite Search and Rescue Service headquartered in Berlin, Ohio. Jacob jumped across the stream and was at my side in a flash. My first words were, “Who sent you?” His immediate response was, “Jesus!”

Next up was Mike Platts, who was wearing a City of Homewood Fire and Rescue shirt. Stunned to see an official Homewood shirt, I asked Mike, “How did you get up here?”

“Your mayor sent me,” he said.

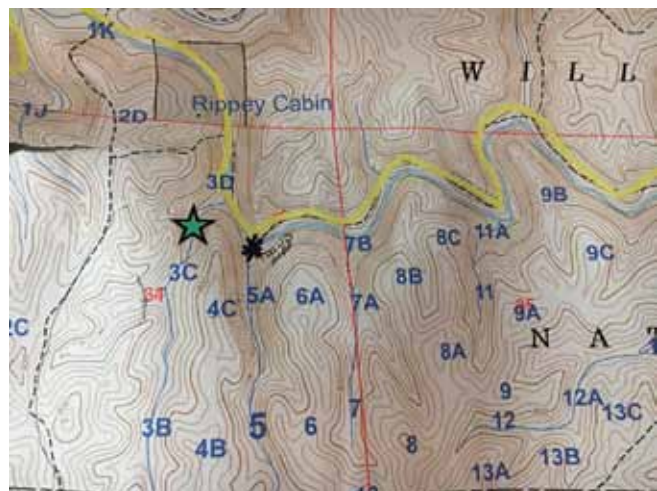
Back at the command center news was trickling in. Grace reports that someone had rigged a wire from the speaker on which search crew leaders could be



Sid Burgess’s daughters Brittany Feld and Grace Burgess with Jacob Evans, a volunteer with the Tennessee Mennonite Search and Rescue team who found the missing hiker.



Mike Platts of the City of Homewood Fire and Rescue was among the search team that found Sid Burgess.



Map showing the location where Sid was found along the Sipsy Fork of the Black Warrior River.

heard making periodic reports to a loud speaker on one of the fire trucks

Grace says a hush came over the crowd gathered at the search site when this word came from Paul Richards, the leader of crew six: “We’ve got something. Moments later they heard, “We found him.” And then, “Conscious and breathing.” With those words, “conscious and breathing,” Grace reports pandemonium broke out: “every emotion you can imagine.” She quotes baseball fan, Pastor Joe Genau: “It was like being in the stadium when your team, the biggest underdogs in the world, come from behind in the bottom of the ninth, with two out, to win the championship!”

Down on the riverbank, the rescue team checked my vital signs and began to stuff me with food and water. I asked if I could call my wife. No one had phone signal, but they assured me that word had been relayed to her that I was okay.

The rescue leaders began discussing the best way to get me out of the forest. The options included hiking me out, which they figured would take about four hours, given my weakened condition and injured



Wife Melissa, center, and daughters Brittany and Grace celebrate at the news of Sid being found.



Rescue team at the site along the Sipsey Fork of the Black Warrior River where Sid was found on the fourth day of the search.



Alabama State Patrol rescue helicopter that airlifted Sid to safety.

knees. Another option was a single, fat-tire stretcher that might work, but it would take several hours to get it down to the river and I would have to be able to walk several hundred yards to reach it.

The discussions seemed to drag on for some time, but I was well attended by rescuers and too numb to be impatient. Eventually, Jacob and Mike removed my muddy boots and socks and began to cut into my overall pant legs. Once the full scope of the damage was assessed they realized they needed to cut my pant legs off above my bloody knees which they wrapped with bandages.

As various rescuers began to gather up my backpack, boots, and hiking poles, I began to hear something about a second helicopter being summoned for a rescue.

I didn't really comprehend what was about to happen until one of the rescuers, wearing cowboy boots, splashed right out into the middle of the river and began waving his arms. Soon, a Vietnam-era Huey helicopter, refurbished and retrofitted by State Troopers, came flying in, lower than the first. An airman dropped down a cable. State Trooper Ronnie Johnson splashed into the water, quickly bent some smaller trees out of the way, and approached me. Several of the rescuers lifted me up and held me as Trooper Johnson hooked me to his rig. Almost at once I was being hoisted into the air, my feet never touching the water.

Two other airmen—all state troopers, I later learned—pulled me on board the chopper and hugged me tightly as the airship flew away with its side door wide open. In what seemed like no time, I could sense we were beginning a descent. I saw a crowd of people below but could not identify anyone.



Sid Burgess greeted by his family, wife Melissa and daughters Brittany and Grace. (Photo by The Northwest Alabamian)

As soon as the chopper's blades began to slow, a stretcher was rolled up to the door of the helicopter. I was lifted up and out onto the stretcher, and it was then that I saw Melissa, weeping, being guided toward me by Grace, Brittany, Hilda, and Lizzy. We all hugged. I could see my sister, Marthanne, reaching for me. I caught glimpses of other friends and relatives, but the ambulance personnel were not stopping for anyone. They hustled me into the ambulance, pulled Melissa inside, and sped us away.

AFTERMATH

I received excellent care at the Princeton Baptist Medical Center emergency room, and then spent one night as an in-patient with the medical staff treating my scraped and bloody legs. Once home we received a "house call" from Sheriff Kirkpatrick and his wife. And, of course, the loving folks of Edgewood Church showered us with all sorts of blessings.

It is still impossible for me to comprehend the amount of media coverage this event generated. I understand local media's interest in "Local Pastor Lost." But it remains hard for me to believe the level of regional, national (*US News and World Report*) and international (*London Daily Mail*) exposure the story got. Family members remain grateful to Kayla Kirkpatrick, wife of Sheriff Bryan Kirkpatrick, and to Pastor Joe Genau, for handling "media relations."



Sid had to be treated for scraped and bloody legs, the abrasions caused by the rubbing of his wet hiking pants.

I spent several weeks writing thank-you notes, by hand just as my mother taught me, to everyone from the governor (for authorizing the rescue helicopter), to mayors, sheriffs, rescue workers, volunteers, and to family members—almost 100 in all. I sent modest donations to the Mennonite Search and Rescue Team and to the Ashridge Volunteer Fire Department. And, when I could drive again, I delivered doughnuts to the Winston County Sheriff's Department and to the Bankhead District Office of the U.S. Forest Service. Plus, I began gathering notes for this narrative fairly early on, though it has taken me a year to complete the project.

Perhaps having had all of these tasks in the aftermath of the event, plus the being busy minute-by-minute trying to survive during the ordeal, my level of post traumatic stress seems to have been significantly less than Melissa's. I shall forever regret the pain, anguish, and stress my getting lost in the Sipsey have caused Melissa, both during those bleak days and in



Grace reviewing details of the search in the days after her father was found.

the months following.

Brittany and Grace also suffered during that period but they are moving on with young and healthy partners and the promise of many fulfilling years to come. Melissa, by contrast, is stuck with me. And my years as a cyclist plus my adventures on the hiking trail have taken their toll.

I recovered quickly enough from the abrasions suffered in the Sipsey. By summer, I was out hiking local trails. But my balance, not good to start with, never returned. Late in the year came a series of seizures stemming from two traumatic brain injuries I had received during my extended career as a long distance cyclist. Those seizures spelled the end of my serious outdoor pursuits, as well as, my driving for six months.

My cycling gear had long ago been sold or given away, and now all of my hiking apparel and gear has been donated to one of the non-profit groups that participated in the Sipsey search. Thank goodness Melissa and I are often going in the same direction so I can ride with her, and my sister comes in from Jasper on Mondays to cart me around. Plus, I walk and ride the city buses. I have found that I can enjoy exercising at the gym while listening to the narration of books, both fiction and non-fiction, played through my iPhone or iPad.

And, as long as my memory holds, I have wonderful recollections of some great miles, both on the road and on the trail. I have a faithful and loving family; an open-minded, open-hearted Church; some wonderful friends; and, good hiking buddies who keep magnificent photographs coming my way. ☘

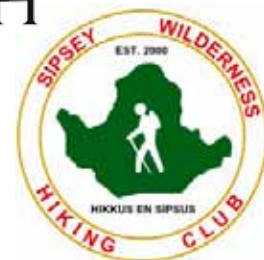
TIPS FOR GREAT HIKING

From the Wilderness Society (www.wilderness.org/articles/article/tips-great-hiking)

- ☛ Carry a map and compass and know how to use them.
- ☛ Bring a pocket knife, and put fire-starting supplies in a water-proof container.
- ☛ Assume the weather will change — bring sun protection, rain gear, and extra layers for sudden cold.
- ☛ Pack extra food and water.
- ☛ And don't forget to tuck in a whistle and a first aid kit, and bring a headlamp in case your hike takes longer than you'd planned.

SID'S TIPS

- ☛ Never hike alone in a wilderness area. In state and national parks, you can almost always be assured of contact with others, should you need help. No so in wilderness areas.
- ☛ When lost stay put. Find a safe, visible spot, sit tight, and give rescuers a chance to find you.
- ☛ Pack emergency, overnight "accommodations" in your backpack.



HIKING THE SIPSEY WILDERNESS

Be safe. Connect with either of these groups for your first forays into the Sipsey Wilderness.

Wild South | wildsouth.org

Wild South has been putting the public in public lands for 28 years, giving communities opportunities to enjoy, value, and protect the wild character and natural legacy of the South.

Sipsey Wilderness Hiking Club | sipseywilderness.org

The purpose of the Sipsey Wilderness Hiking Club is to support the sport of hiking, and protect, promote and enjoy the Sipsey Wilderness Area of the Bankhead National Forest.

ABOUT THE BANKHEAD NATIONAL FOREST

The Bankhead National Forest was first established in 1918 as the Alabama National Forest. In 1942, the Forest was re-named to honor U.S. Congressman and Speaker of the House of Representatives, William B. Bankhead, of Jasper (1874-1940).

[Far better known is the father's daughter, actress Tallulah Bankhead (1903-1968), celebrated for her outrageous personality and acerbic wit: "If I were well behaved, I'd die of boredom." And, "I'm as pure as the driven slush."]

The Sipsey Wilderness lies wholly within the Bankhead Forest. (The word Sipsey is derived from Creek and Choctaw Indian words.) It was designated a national wilderness area in 1975, and was expanded to its present size of nearly 25,000 acres in 1988. By Federal law, Wilderness is defined as "an area where the earth and community life are untrammelled by man (sic), where man himself is a visitor who does not remain ..." In other words, no visitor centers, no campgrounds, no paved roads, no motorized vehicles, etc.

