

**A JOURNEY IN THE BACK  
COUNTRY IN THE  
WINTER OF 1853-4; IN  
TWO VOLUMES, VOL. II**

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A Journey in the Back Country in the Winter of 1853-4; In Two Volumes, Vol. II by Frederick Law Olmsted

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**FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED**

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# ❁ A Journey in the Back Country ❁ ❁

In the Winter of 1853-4

By

Frederick Law Olmsted

Author of "A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States," "A Journey in Texas,"  
"Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England," etc.

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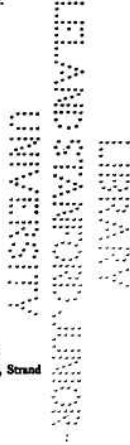
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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
VI.—THE HIGHLANDERS— <i>Continued</i> . . . . .	1
VII.—PATRIARCHAL LIFE IN VIRGINIA, AND IN GENERAL	38
VIII.—SLAVERY EXTENSION; SOUTHERN COMMERCE AND COTTON SUPPLY; PRESENT CONDITION AND CHAR- ACTER OF THE CITIZENS OF THE SOUTH; THE CAUSES AND THE REMEDY . . . . .	47
IX.—CHARACTER AND MANNERS . . . . .	154
X.—THE DANGER OF THE SOUTH . . . . .	213
INDEX . . . . .	277



IN  
THE BACK COUNTRY

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CHAPTER VI—(*Continued*)

THE HIGHLANDERS

*Ashtville, July 11th.*—This is a beautiful place among the hills, with a number of pretty country-seats about it, which, I suppose are summer residences of South Carolina planters. A great many of these "Southerners," as they are called here, are now travelling farther north, to spend the heat of summer at the numerous sulphur springs and other pleasure haunts, where good boarding-houses have been established for them along the cool region of the Blue Ridge. I passed one of these, a sulphur spring, yesterday. It was a white, wooden building, with a long piazza for smokers, loungers, and flirts, and a bowling alley and shuffle-board; with coaches and trotting wagons at the stable; poor women picking blackberries, poor men bringing fowls, schoolgirls studiously climbing romantic rocks and otherwise making themselves as pretty as possible, children fighting their black nurses,



and old gold spectacles stopping me to inquire if I was the mail, and if I had not got a newspaper.

It is very odd, by the way, what old news one keeps getting in these places far from telegraphs. I inquired here for a late paper, and the clerk of the hotel went to a store to get one. It was the *Ashville News*, with the same articles copied from New York papers, which I had read a month before. All this country is to be netted by railroads soon, however; that is, as soon as they can be built after an appropriation to assist them passes Congress. I have crossed engineers' stakes every day, I believe, since I left Jackson, Mississippi, and generally, when I stop at night, the farmer tells me that a railroad, which will be *the* link which is wanting, either in a direct communication between the Atlantic and the Mississippi, or between New York and New Orleans, is to pass between his house and his corn-crib, and that in consequence land about him has lately become of great value, that is, from four to ten dollars an acre. He is in great perplexity, too, to conclude how much he can make the railroad company pay for damages.

Day before yesterday I ascended "Balsam Mountain," said to have been recently ascertained to be the highest peak of the Appalachian chain. A barometrical measurement of Professor W. D. Jones, of Tennessee, makes it ten thousand and three hundred feet above the sea, or one hundred and five feet higher than Black Mountain, which has always had the reputation of being the highest. I was told that the ascent was

easy, and could be made on horseback to within less than a quarter of a mile of the top. I was offered a guide, but preferred to go alone, leaving Belshazzar to rest and recruit below.

The mountain is one of a very lofty range, and the gap between it and the next peak is crossed by a (State) turnpike road. The distance to the top from this road is about four miles, and its elevation above the road, four thousand feet. A very rank growth of weeds and grass covers the ground on nearly all parts of the mountain to the top, which is all used as a range for cattle, horses, and hogs, and would be very profitably employed in this way but for the havoc committed on young cattle, and especially on swine and sheep, by bears, wolves, and panthers.

The horses and cattle make so many paths that I was soon led astray from the one which leads directly to the top (if there is any such), and had to shape my course by the sun, and the apparent feasibility of the ground in different directions before me. The mountain, to within less than a mile from the top, is entirely shaded by a forest of large trees, the chestnut predominating. The only change found as you ascend, is in their height; the trunks continually becoming shorter and sturdier. At perhaps half a mile from the summit, the trees appear gradually more scattered; at length there is a nearly bald zone, covered, however, with grass and weeds waist high. Above this, at a quarter of a mile from the top, begins a forest of balsam firs (popularly called "balsams"). In the interval, be-

tween the two forests, the ascent was steep and fatiguing. Whether owing to the exertion of climbing altogether, or somewhat to the rarity of the atmosphere, I was obliged to stop frequently to rest, to relieve myself from a rush of blood to the head. The moment I entered the balsam forest, I was freed from this. These balsams are thirty or forty feet high, and under their shelter flourish a variety of smaller trees and shrubs. A great many of these trees have fallen down, and the nearer I came to the top the steeper became the ascent, the more frequent the prostrate trees, and the thicker and more impenetrable the undergrowth, a large part of it being blackberry briars. I crept under and climbed over, and pulled myself along slowly, and at length came to a knob or pinnacle, across and upon which, trees and shrubs, and stumps, with the roots uppermost, seemed to have been hurled by a whirlwind. Supposing this to be the summit itself, I climbed among the roots and briars, the best way I could, until I got my head above the wreck. It was very dark from the shade of the standing trees, and I perceived that the rocks rose still higher beyond. I worked my way down again and continued climbing, until I reached a comparatively level surface of several yards in extent, from which a number of trees had been cut away so as to open a view in two or three directions. A dense cloud hung in a circle all around the peak, and though it was quite clear in the centre where I stood, I could not see beyond it at all. Overhead, at a still vast apparent dis-