

West Virginia

by Kevin P. Nielsen



I spent many years growing up in the smoky mountains of West Virginia. I can think of no place else on earth where I feel as serene or as safe as I do as when I'm there. The long winding roads that hug the hills and mountains like an endless ball of twine seem to go on forever. The roads take you higher and higher into the smoky blue heavens that resemble a paradise found, not lost. The air has a freshness to it like a bird being released from captivity to fly in the wild for the first time.

Thick forests surround the mountains in all directions. In the spring, flowing rivers and babbling brooks cut through the mountainous landscape like veins and arteries that are alive with fisherman hoping for that big catch. Tiny white and yellow wild flowers dot the ground, and every now and then a lone rhododendron bush peeks out to share its lush thick blossoms with a hiker and a doe and her fawn, standing skittishly nearby.

Brilliant colors abound during the fall season. Deep reds, golds, yellows—such vivid colors one thinks unimaginable in nature—greet the eye. The tall trees are ablaze while their leaves drift lazily to the ground below. This panorama of hues brings visitors and homesick West Virginians back to my hometown,

Elkins, on the first weekend of October each year to celebrate the Forest Festival.



Early on Friday morning, townspeople line the benches that cover a rolling slope on the campus of Davis and Elkins College. At the top of the hill, young children dressed as court jesters begin to dance and tumble down the hill to delight the crowd as trumpeters announce the royal court's arrival. Two by two, the princesses appear at the crest of the hill, each pair identically gowned in brilliant solid color velvet. Each new pair wears yet another velvet color, and each one is mimicked in the palette of autumn leaves that adorns the surrounding hills. Fresh-faced ROTC cadets guide the princesses carefully down the slope as the band plays *Pomp and Circumstance* and the crowd applauds. The court assembles on stage at the bottom of the hill, and the crowd

again gasps at the vividness of the autumn colors they wear.

Suddenly, the trumpeters announce the minor court. Young boys and girls in festive costumes descend the slope carefully, glancing around to find family members in the crowd. These are flower girls and crown bearers, and they too climb onto the stage and wait expectantly. All eyes return to the top of the hill.

And now the royal trumpet salute signals that Maid Sylvia has arrived. The fairest maiden in the state has come to be crowned Queen Sylvia, representing the sylvan forests of the state. She appears at the top of the hill, and proceeds slowly down, dressed in an exquisite satin and velvet gown with a long matching train that is awkwardly managed by two small children helping to keep it from touching the ground. Maid Sylvia approaches the stage, turns to greet her subjects, and is honored as the band plays a lovely plaintive melody,



“Who is Sylvia?”

Then from the left of the stage comes the governor of the state, who administers the Oath of Office to Maid Sylvia and carefully places the crown upon her head. The crowd erupts in applause for the newest Queen Sylvia. The Forest Festival has begun!

“Almost Heaven, West Virginia”, as the song goes...and so it seems, this place touched by God with beautiful sunrises, heartbreaking sunsets, and color-draped mountains one never wants to leave.