

**Testimony of Thomas A. Shipley
of the Sharp Farm, Slatyfork, West Virginia**

**Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests
and Public Lands Committee on Natural Resources,
United States House of Representatives**

July 30, 2009

Concerning H.R. 3113

**To amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to
designate a segment of the Elk River in the State
of West Virginia for study for potential addition
to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.
(Upper Elk River Wild and Scenic Study Act)**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to share with you the deep-rooted connection of our family with the Upper Elk River. Her waters played a significant role in shaping our pioneer past. They sustain us still in this present day and are the foundation of our hopes and dreams for the future.

I am here to represent the descendents of the 1700's pioneer settler, William Sharp. I am the eighth generation to reside in Pocahontas County. My forefathers owned much of the land on and around the proposed area of study. Our holdings, over time, have been reduced to somewhere around 1800 acres...all in the proximity of the Upper Elk River.

Our early log home was constructed along the bank at the river's birth. The confluence of the spring fed rapids of Old Field Fork and Big Spring Fork forms a dramatic gateway that is well described as a gift from God.

A later log home was situated, upstream, near one of West Virginia's largest cold-water springs. This 1800's structure still stands. It was the host to Robert E. Lee on two occasions during the Civil War. His first campaign as general of the Confederate Army was through our valley. My great, great grandfather, Silas Sharp, was arrested in this home, as a spy, by the Confederate Army. His little brother, Luther, was killed in that skirmish. Silas spent 2 years in a prison camp in Salisbury, North Carolina. A prisoner exchange freed him. He walked home and appeared at the doorstep of his fiancé, who did not recognize him.

Silas recovered, married and had a family. His son, (my great grandfather) L.D. Sharp, established Sharp's Country Store in 1884. I own and operate this store today, a 125-year example of Living History.

The introduction of timbering in the early 1900's resulted in the establishment of a small village, Slatyfork. The village is mostly gone, but many folk still reside nearby and tell intriguing stories of life on the river. Timbering remains a tradition.

In 1926, the old Seneca Indian trail was paved and the Seneca Highway brought many new people to the area. My great grandfather found that folks traveling had no place to stay. He constructed numerous tourist cabins along the river. We have family letters from the early 1900's documenting the fact that, even in that day, folks were out touring the countryside in appreciation of the natural beauty in those newfangled contraptions called automobiles.

Eco-tourism remains a strong and growing factor in the Upper Elk River watershed. A well-kept secret, the Upper Elk is known worldwide by a select group of anglers. From as far away as

Scotland they make an annual pilgrimage to fish her waters. The Upper Elk carries the unfortunate, but crucially important designation as one of the last places on the East Coast with all three naturally reproducing (non-stocked) species of trout; Native Brook (our state fish), Rainbow and Brown.

The unique karst geology (fissured limestone) acts as a stage for a remarkable, dynamic system of springs and caves that play an important role in the enjoyment of anglers, spelunkers and naturalists from around the world. Our pioneer family discovered many of these wonders, including Sharp's Cave...a four mile, two-story spectacle that hosts the underground passage of Big Spring Fork, including a magnificent underground waterfall. Many of these natural gifts remain largely unexplored. In the proposed study area, for example, an extraordinary cascade of water from the surface of the Upper Elk River falling into an abyss. This cave, which pirates away a portion of the aboveground flow, is as dangerous as it is beautiful; thus, unexplored as to its configuration and contribution to the natural world.

A 'new' species of crayfish was discovered on our farm. It is one of only two crayfish known to be endemic to West Virginia. It is not a burrower. It seeks shelter and breeds in-between the river rock. The *Cambarus Elkensis* depends upon the free flow of clean, cold water for its existence.

The river is largely, now, as it was. We thank Representative Rahall for the introduction of this important legislation as it represents the will of the people of Pocahontas County to preserve the river and the historic uses of her immediate surroundings. Doing so will ensure its viability for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

We offer our support and look forward to participating in the creation of an Upper Elk River Management Plan that will allow us to see designation of the Upper Elk River as 'Wild & Scenic' through to fruition.

Sincerely,

Tom Shipley