



Bob Childress 1890-1956

American history is replete with unknown pastor heroes who braved the wilderness and brought the light of the gospel to wild and brutal areas. One fascinating example is mountain man Bob Childress.

Buffalo Mountain in Virginia's Blue Ridge rises to 3,972 feet, a thousand feet above the surrounding hills. The early settlers thought the summit looked like a charging buffalo with its head lowered and its hump bulging. The early settlers on Buffalo were Scotch-Irish, but the God-fearing ways of those earliest pioneers had long died out on the mountain. The living conditions were harsh, and the people were desperately poor. Most families had their own stills, and drunkenness was rampant on the mountains.

Bob Childress' family, which lived in The Hollow across from the Buffalo, was poorer than most. Born January 19, 1890, when a mountain blizzard was howling, Bob grew up in a one-room cabin with his four brothers and four sisters.

When Bob was about six, the Quakers at Guilford College in North Carolina started a school in the Hollow, and though Bob's parents were against it, Bob was encouraged to attend. Bob loved school and walked five miles each day to attend. When he was fourteen, the teacher married and left the Hollow, and the school closed. There wasn't much to do in the mountains, so Bob joined the other boys in their wild times. Drinking, playing poker, and "rocking" (throwing rocks at) houses and churches, became a way of life. Killings often occurred during the drinking bouts and poker games.

Though now a part of the wild life of the mountains, Bob couldn't figure out the constant fighting and killing. In fights his jaw was broken; once he was shot in the leg and once in the shoulder. He stated, "Time and again, I saw men kill each other, men without hate . . . , but drunk and with guns and knives always handy. . . The year I was twenty I was hardly ever sober, not even in the morning. I was miserable and sick to my soul. . ."

One Sunday after playing cards and drinking, Bob found himself outside a Methodist church and went in during a revival. He continued attending the revival the entire week, and for the first time "felt a power stronger than the power of liquor and rocks and guns."

After he began attending a small Presbyterian church in The Hollow, Bob realized only the gospel of Jesus Christ could change the mountain people. If he really wanted to help the mountain people; he would need to become a minister. By then, however, Bob was thirty with a wife and four children – and he hadn't even finished eighth grade! He resolutely began high school the same year his oldest son started first grade. Father and son daily rode the six miles to school sitting together on a mule. Within a year Bob learned everything the school had to teach; the next year he attended Davidson College, North Carolina. After a year of college, Bob said he didn't have time to finish college and needed to go to seminary.

Union Theological Seminary in Richmond wouldn't accept him but did allow him to attend classes without credit. Bob was ten years older than his classmates and was a great source of amusement. His suit didn't cover his wrists or ankles, and his mountain speech caused frequent snickers. Bob persevered and worked harder than the regular students. By the end of the year, the seminary president apologized and allowed Bob to enroll, providing him housing for his family and two scholarships. In the summer and twice a month, Bob preached in the Presbyterian Church in Mayberry. Even large Richmond churches began to ask for Bob Childress to preach in their pulpits.

As his time at seminary drew to an end, Bob wanted to have a ministry with the mountain people. He was offered a pastorate with a fabulous salary and automobile. The night before he had to make a decision, he received a calling to a small church on Buffalo Mountain. He was told, "We've got a field in the mountains where they're shooting each other, they're ignorant, they don't have a chance; they have no schools or Sunday schools. There's enough work to kill you."

Bob Childress knew this was where he belonged. On June 3, 1926, he packed up his family and moved to Buffalo Mountain. For the next thirty years he ministered selflessly to the mountain people, establishing churches and schools and helping people in every way. He usually visited five to eight families a day in their small mountain homes, showing a personal interest in individuals. Children, whose identities were often lost in the large families, often felt that Bob Childress was the first person who made them feel they were special. Often, Bob would lead weekday prayer meetings in one of the mountain cottages.

For years he had the only car on the mountain, and he regularly took people to the doctor and the hospital in town. On Sundays he would travel a circuit on the mountain of 100 miles, preaching four or five sermons. In the winter, when his car couldn't travel through the snow, Bob traveled to churches on a mule or by horse and buggy. Under his ministry the mountain became more civilized and the

killings were less frequent. Christmas had always been a drinking time; for the first time many of the mountaineers learned the true meaning of Christmas.

In the 1950's, Bob Childress was leading services in fourteen churches a week and averaging 40,000 miles a year in his travels. The Synod of Virginia noted that "Only eternity will tell the tremendous good accomplished in this unusual diocese."

Bob Childress died peacefully in 1956, but the six rock churches he established on Buffalo Mountain continue to flourish.