

Walter Matia
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Texas: A Sense of Place



Texas Treasure by Walter Matia 20"H x 30 1/2"W x 8"D Edition 48

A one man exhibition
Friday, March 14, 2008, 6:30 p.m.



COLLECTORS  COVEY

Gallery at Inwood Village

Wild Heritage

By Todd Tanner



You could tell that Don and Ernie were proud of their stream. A little nervous, maybe, about showing off such a great brook trout creek – a tiny West Virginia gem – to a writer they didn't know. But they were proud, too, and justifiably so. It was a gorgeous spot with beautiful native fish, and the only imperfection in evidence was the streamside trash that the landowner, a cautious fellow wanting to avoid any potential legal liability, had asked the local Trout Unlimited chapter to leave alone.

I can't say I was crazy about the old tires and plastic soda bottles that we walked by with some regularity, but the stream itself, running cold and clear through the rhododendrons and dropping down over water-worn ledges, was perfect. And the brookies, dressed up in their fall spawning colors . . . well, let's just say you'd have to go a long, long way to find a fish as handsome as a wild Mountain State brook trout.

It's too bad that Don and Ernie's little creek might not be around in a few years.

Mountain Top Removal coal mining is destroying fish and wildlife habitat at unheard-of levels, all for the sake of cheap electricity.



TODD TANNER

Mountain Top Removal coal mining not only devastates the land, but pollutes nearby trout streams.

West Virginia is known for its coal, but coal and West Virginia haven't always had the easiest of relationships. Miners and coal companies have fought at times – enough people were killed back in 1921 that the locals are still singing songs about *The Battle of Blair Mountain* – but even when they're on the same side, there's still a pretty clear distinction between the folks counting the cash and the folks eating the dirt.

And now, of course, with underground mines falling out of favor and Mountain Top Removal (MTR) becoming more and more prevalent, mining jobs are way down at the same time habitat destruction is reaching unheard-of levels.

Which brings us back to Don and Ernie's creek. If the coal companies have their way, a fair amount of that pretty little stream could end up buried under a mountain's worth of rubble. Literally buried. It would simply disappear.

No matter who you are, the statistics are alarming. They're even worse if you're a sportsman. Half-a-million acres of forest have been lost. More than 700 miles of creeks and streams have vanished forever. Hollows – or hollers, as the folks who live nearby call them – where West Virginians have fished and hunted for generations, are filled in with rubble. Surface water is polluted. Ground water is contaminated. Dust covers everything. Folks get sick with cancer and other nasty stuff. Then they die.

Oh, and the mountains, those famous Mountain State mountains, are leveled. Once again, literally,

amazingly, leveled. They just aren't there anymore.

I know. It seems crazy, doesn't it?

John Denver sang it so well:
Almost heaven, West Virginia
Blue ridge mountains
Shenandoah River
Life is old there
Older than the trees
Younger than the mountains
Growin' like a breeze

But as beautiful as the countryside is, or possibly because

it is so beautiful, it's hard to get your mind around casting for trout or smallmouth bass, or chasing deer or turkeys, in a place where, likely as not, something – the fish, the wildlife, the water, the air, the actual physical landscape – has been impacted by MTR mining.

Not that the loss of hunting and fishing opportunities is the worst of it. Some friends and I drove up to Kayford Mountain and spent a little time talking to Larry Gibson. Larry has land

on the top of the mountain. The mining companies asked him to sell. He didn't. Now he lives surrounded by Hell, assuming for a second that when you take a beautiful tree-covered ridge and blast, smash and crush it to nothingness, you really are creating Hell on Earth; a place where nothing grows and nothing lives, a place without a future.

The worst of it, Larry told me, was when he went out and found some men with bulldozers and blasting equipment fixing to start in on the family cemetery. What can you say about that? That's hallowed ground, the sacred place where Larry's grandparents were laid to rest – Rest In Peace; aren't those the words we use? – and to walk out and find some son-of-a

Sorry, but I can't go there right now. I can't even tell you what I think of people who'd bulldoze the local cemetery and then blow it all to smithereens to get at the coal underneath.



Anyway, if you ever find yourself with a couple hours to kill in Charleston, West Virginia, take a drive out to Kayford Mountain and have Larry show you around. You might not enjoy what you see, but I can pretty much guarantee you won't forget it.

So where was I? That's right. MTR. Mountain Top Removal mining.

I guess I could tell you some of the other stories I heard on my trip to coal country. Sportsman losing access to the places they hunt and fish. Game disappearing. Fish dying from pollution. Folks turning on the tap only to have black gunk ooze into their kitchen sink.


But after a while, the overwhelming enormity of it all starts to beat you down and make you numb. You begin thinking: *I just came here to write about the hunting and fishing. How do I deal with all this other stuff, all this insanity? How can they do this to a landscape they love?*

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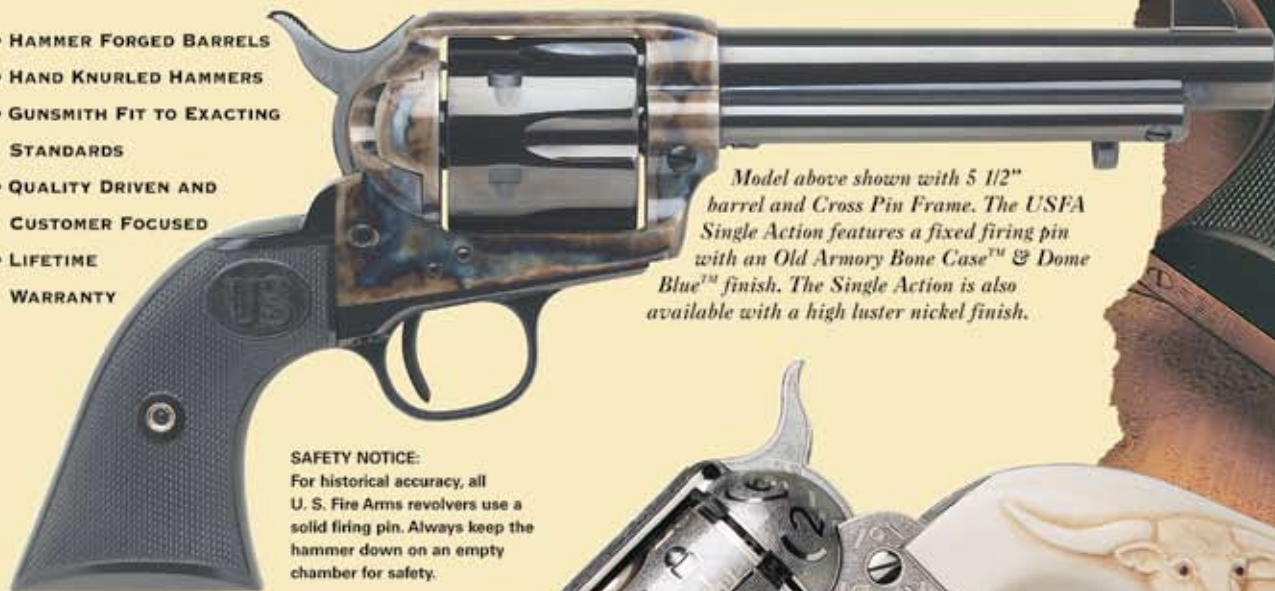
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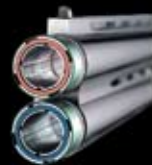
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Please don't get me wrong. There's still a lot of natural beauty left in West Virginia, along with some wonderful people and a fair amount of quality hunting and fishing. And there are also places where the more traditional underground coal mining seems to coexist reasonably well with the landscape and the local wildlife.

The big trouble comes when you decide that it's easier and cheaper to tear the top off a mountain, haul off the coal, and dump all the rubble down into the creek bottoms and hollows. Although I guess from a certain perverse viewpoint, mountain top removal mining actually does make sense. If your sole concern is cutting costs to the bone and maximizing profits, MTR pencils out. Not for the local communities, of course, and not for the fish or the wildlife, and definitely not for the sportsmen. No, MTR is hell on hunters and anglers, and understandably so, as it's pretty damn tough to hunt a ridge that no longer exists or fish a creek that's been filled in with mining waste.

Profits, though . . . when you're selling all that MTR coal, your cash register just keeps ringing and ringing, and your bank account keeps getting bigger and bigger.

When everything is said and done, we need to make a conscious decision about our country's future. Do we continue to blow up our mountains, dump the rubble in our valleys, devastate our prime wildlife habit and pollute the air and water – all for the sake of cheap electricity? Or do we put our faith in American ingenuity, roll up our sleeves and get to work on energy alternatives that don't invite Heaven's wrath?

The answer, as I suspect you already know, is relatively simple. Call your Senators and Congressman and tell them to get rid of Mountain Top Removal mining. It's the only sane thing to do. 🐾

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