



Holidays for the Hollidays 55 Years at Kumbrabow

By Courtney Sisk

Tucked deep in the woodlands of Randolph County and high atop Rich Mountain, Kumbrabow State Forest is so remote, many West Virginians have never even heard of it. But Jim and Sally Holliday of Hurricane discovered this jewel of nature more than 55 years ago. Since then they have been bringing friends and family to what they say is the state's best-kept secret.

"I had a cousin who introduced me to Kumbrabow," says Jim, a former senior status circuit judge who served Putnam and Mason Counties before retiring. "When I graduated from law school in 1956, we went hunting there for the first time. I've been every year since."

For Jim, outings to Kumbrabow were initially turkey hunting trips with the guys, but soon he and Sally were bringing the whole family there. The Hollidays had five children in nine years. Their oldest child, John, or "Doc," is well known today as Marshall University's head football coach. Doc and his siblings all learned about the magic of Kumbrabow from a young age.

"From the time they were babies we just packed our van

full of kids and dogs and went," says Sally. "Kids learn about things there that they otherwise wouldn't have any knowledge of, like using an outhouse or cooking on a wood stove. It's just a great place for families to retreat. So peaceful, and no interruptions."

Pioneer Living

At elevations of 3,000 to nearly 4,000 feet above sea level, Kumbrabow State Forest is West Virginia's loftiest state forest. Like many state parks and forests, this nearly 9,500-acre woodland was established during the Great Depression, when the Civilian Conservation Corps Act of 1933 enabled states to develop state-owned lands at federal expense.

Kumbrabow State Forest was purchased on December 29, 1934, from the Midland Corporation at a cost of around one dollar per acre. The forest derives its unusual name from the names of three men who were influential in its creation: Governor Herman Guy Kump, Elkins businessman Spates Brady, and Elkins attorney Hubert Bowers.

Kumbrabow features five primitive "pioneer cabins" built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), as well as a new, handicap-accessible cottage. A peaceful trout stream runs beside the structures.



A peaceful stream borders Kumbrabow State Forest's five "pioneer cabins" and cottage. Photo by Ron Snow

◀ **Sally and Jim Holliday view** albums of family memories. Photo by Steve Shaluta



The Holliday family has grown and changed, but many places in Kumbrabow State Forest remain the same. Photos courtesy of the Holliday family

The cabins and cottage have no running water. Rather, guests use outhouses and draw water from area wells. The cabins each have a stone fireplace, a wood-burning stove, propane gas lights, and a propane gas refrigerator. A bathhouse at the forest's headquarters offers coin-operated showers.

The cabins have been updated a bit since Jim Holliday's earliest visits. In those days, there were kerosene lamps and ice boxes. The outhouses remain a rustic amenity and a source of entertainment for the Holliday family.

"Don't let the kids see you go in," Sally says with a laugh. "They rock the outhouse, which is funny when you're expecting it but a shock when you're not. There's never a dull moment."

Sally says the park was also improved with touches added by Stephanie Bailey, who was in charge several years ago. "She put valances on the windows and doors on the cabinets, where there used to be just shelves," she says.

Peace and Relaxation

The two closest towns to Kumbrabow are Mill Creek and Huttonsville, each about 14 miles away over curvy country roads. Kumbrabow's remoteness is part of what has captivated the Hollidays for so many years.

"It's two and a half miles up the mountain and two miles down to where the cabins are," says Sally. "Once you're there you can't run to the store, so you have to bring what you need. We've been going for so long, we're pretty well prepared, but we always make do if we forget something."

Once they settle in, the peace of the forest becomes a way of life for the Hollidays. "The usual tasks may be harder when you don't have running water, but the demands of home are not there," Sally says. "There are no phones, TV, or computers. You're not concerned about anything else. You just wake up in the morning and there's nothing you have to do and no deadlines you have to meet."

These days the Hollidays head to Kumbrabow annually for long weekends in the spring or fall, and for a week in the summer. Pictures taken through the years reflect the family's many changes. The clan now includes sons- and daughters-in-law, as well as 14 grandchildren, the youngest of whom is two years old.

"Our youngest grandchild loves it as much as the older kids," says Sally. "He likes to hike and play in the creek and slide down the falls. The girls play characters from *Little House on the Prairie*. They like to hang out clothes and carry water from the well. They wade and fish in the creek and hike on the trails. A favorite is climbing the trail to Raven's Rock, which looks out over the whole countryside. They never complain about being bored. These are things our children enjoyed, and they wanted this for their children."

Sharing with Friends

The Hollidays have also shared Kumbrabow with many friends over the years. Bill and Sharon Garvin of Morgantown have known the family nearly five decades and vividly remember their first trip. "We were coming in from

Webster Springs, and it was really dark and raining hard,” Bill recalls. “Sharon said, ‘I don’t know about this.’” But the Garvins quickly fell in love with Kumbrabow, and their son later chose the forest for his wedding.

The Garvins are just one of the several families—some from out of state—who have continued to visit Kumbrabow after their first visit with the Hollidays. The family has also made new friends at the forest. Some first-time visitors aren’t prepared to cope with carrying water or heating and cooking on a wood stove, so the Hollidays help them get acclimated.

“It doesn’t take long for everyone there to become acquainted and neighborly while sharing this special place,” Sally says.

Over the years, the Hollidays have enjoyed many outdoor adventures at Kumbrabow, but there was one experience with Mother Nature that Sally says she hopes never to repeat.

“We arrived late at night and it was raining, and our van got stuck in the mud,” she remembers. “We had to walk down the mountain to the cabins to get help. We were stuck for 10 days because a storm knocked down trees and they blocked the roads. We had to ration food for all of us. I was a Girl Scout leader and I used every trick in the book to keep the children entertained. We learned later that the storm was Hurricane Camille!”

These days, the Holliday family finds it hard to find a time to visit Kumbrabow that is convenient for all members. “Doc is very busy during football season and then he is recruiting in the off season,” Sally says. “The other families are all involved in school or their activities, but they do their best to get to Kumbrabow as often as possible.”

“Kumbrabow meant a lot to me growing up,” says Marshall football coach Doc Holliday. “It’s one of West Virginia’s real treasures. I still look forward to being there with my family. It’s special time spent together, when we leave the demands of daily living behind.”

Though they have visited most of West Virginia’s state parks and even honeymooned at Watoga 56 years ago, the Hollidays continue to return to Kumbrabow State Forest year after year to rediscover its special magic. In 2008, the family celebrated Jim’s 80th birthday and 52nd consecutive year at Kumbrabow by donating a bench in his honor. A plaque on the bench is inscribed with these words: “In the woods we return to reason and faith.”

“We’re lucky to have touchstones in our lives and Kumbrabow has been one of them,” Jim says. “When there are only five cabins in a place where you’re isolated, you’re bound to get close to it. A feeling just comes over us when we drive in there. That’s where we know we’re supposed to be.”

For more information about the pioneer cabins, cottage, campsites, and other facilities at Kumbrabow State Forest, visit www.kumbrabow.com, or call 304.335.2219 or 1.800.CALL.WVA. 🌲

A public information specialist with the Department of Commerce, Courtney Sisk was born and raised in Beckley and is a proud graduate of Marshall University. She and her son, Andrew, enjoy all the fun, indoors and out, that West Virginia has to offer.

In 2008, the Hollidays donated a bench at Kumbrabow in honor of Jim Holliday. Photo courtesy of the Holliday family

