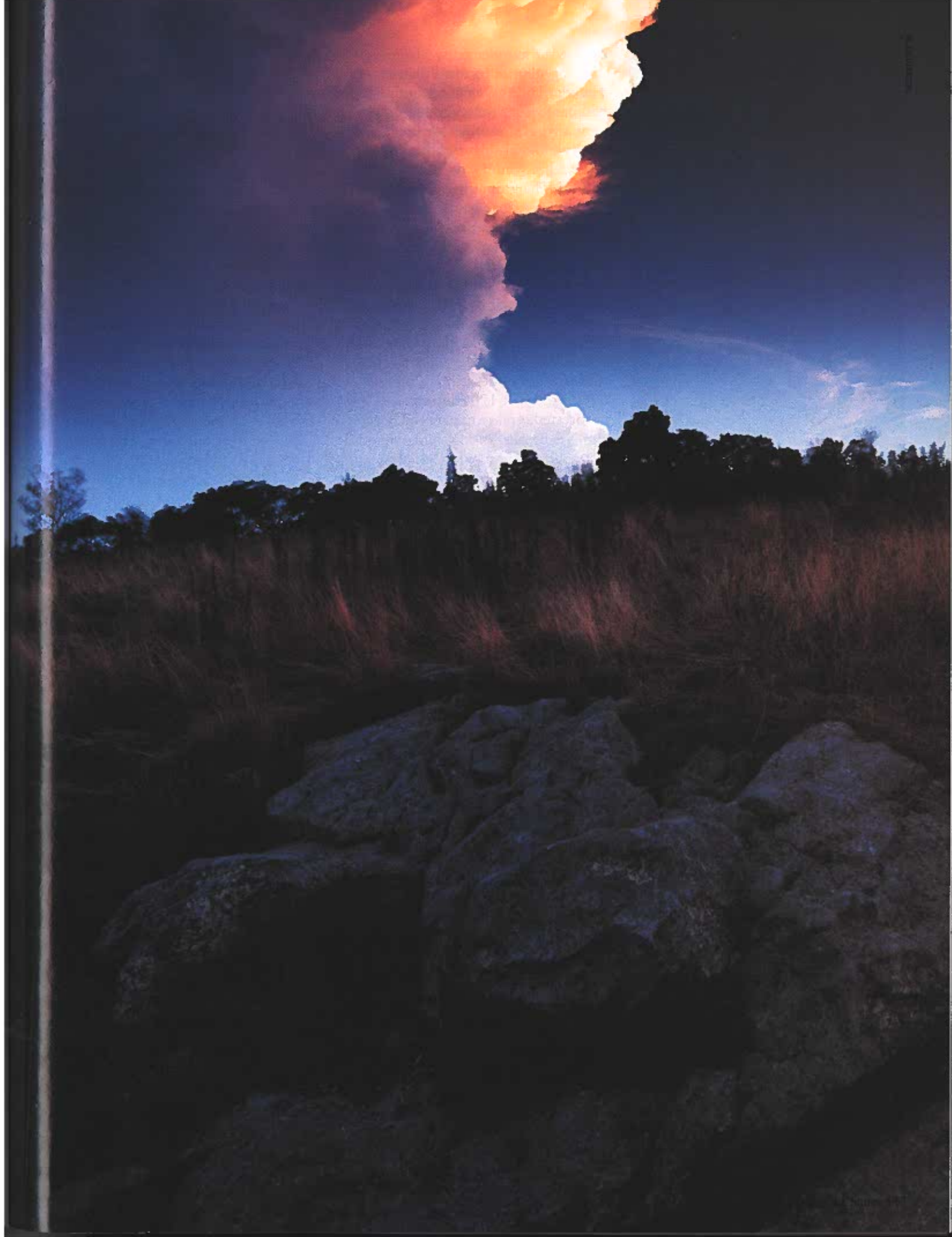


# nelly's tale

*The hills rumbled with thunder, but something more than a summer storm was brewing on Thunder Hill.*

BY R. KELLY COFFEY



**N**ear the town of Blowing Rock, Thunder Hill rises prominently from the Blue Ridge, dividing the streams of the Atlantic-bound Yadkin River from the waters of the New River headed for Mississippi. The site has been known as Thunder Hill for generations, even before the Blue Ridge Parkway overlook of the same name was constructed near its crest.

True to its name, Thunder Hill seems to attract violent summer thunderstorms, due in part to heat rising up the escarpment from the foothills. Even when no storm threatens locally, Piedmont thunderstorms — some as far away as Charlotte — often can be viewed in

exposed to the elements.

Spangenburg described their night on Thunder Hill: “We put up our tent, but had barely finished when there came such a wind storm that we could hardly stand against it. I think I have never felt a winter wind so strong and so cold. The ground was covered with snow; water froze beside the fire.” As a result, the group hurried down the Blue Ridge the next day and eventually chose modern-day Forsyth County as their settlement site (which leads one to speculate whether North Carolina history would be significantly different if they had arrived at Thunder Hill on a pleasant summer day).

Spangenburg described Thunder Hill in the mid-1700s as an unforested, grassy expanse. The site

located on Thunder Hill. Nelly, her husband, Carl, and their infant son lived near the bottom of the hill. Nelly was mindful of sudden storms because their workhorse was terrified of loud noises and frequently ran through the pasture fence if caught in a thunderstorm. To prevent its injury, Nelly would catch the horse whenever she heard a storm approach and secure it in the barn until it was over.

Late one evening as darkness was creeping up the hollow and the stillness of night began to settle in, Nelly heard a faint rumbling noise — so faint, in fact, that she wasn’t sure that she had heard anything at all. Might be a storm brewing, she thought, and set her mind on catching the horse before the light faded

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the distance at night, while clear skies and vivid stars are visible directly overhead. During such events, observers at Thunder Hill have an aerial view of spectacular lightning displays arcing in and around massive glowing clouds.

### Visitors past and present

Thunder Hill’s inhospitable weather is not limited to summer thunderstorms. In 1752, Moravian Bishop August Spangenburg and several other men were exploring the foothills of northwestern North Carolina for a suitable settlement site for a group of Pennsylvania Moravians. Their guide became lost and led them directly up the Blue Ridge. Although the precise location cannot be determined with certainty, their general route and Spangenburg’s journal descriptions indicate that they crested the slope in the vicinity of Thunder Hill. The group spent a miserable December night there,

generally retains that characteristic today. This open, elevated area is a popular local gathering site for viewing various astronomical events. During a recent meteor shower, for example, cars lined the side of the Blue Ridge Parkway in the Thunder Hill area at four in the morning.

Daytime visitors to the Parkway overlook often cross the road to an open pasture, rest on the large rock outcroppings, and take in the views. Thunder Hill is a remarkable Parkway stopping point because distant mountain peaks are visible from both sides of the road, unlike most overlooks, which offer a view in only one direction. Visitors experiencing this peaceful, bucolic setting today might be surprised to learn that Thunder Hill was once the site of a frightful event, according to one woman.

### Shadow in the woods

In the 1920s before the construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway, a farm was

altogether. She was stringing green beans on the porch, however, and with a lap full of beans she decided to finish the task before getting up. But by the time Nelly broke the last bean she had forgotten about the horse and the noise she had heard.

The family went on to bed, and as she was drifting off to sleep, Nelly heard the rumbling again, slightly louder than before. Remembering the horse, she crawled out of bed, slipped on her shoes, and proceeded out the door and across the porch. Nelly stopped short before walking down the steps when she noticed the brightness of the night, lit by a full moon. Bracing herself on a porch post, she leaned out and saw stars in every direction. Can’t be a storm coming, she thought, there’s not a cloud in the sky. I must’ve dreamed about hearing thunder. She saw the silhouette of the horse under an apple tree at the top of the hill, but she gave up the thought of catching it because the hill was steep, she was

tired, and no storm was in sight. As she turned to go in the house, she detected a movement near the bottom of the hill in the shadows of the woods. She shrugged it off and went back to bed.

### Terrifying encounter

But she couldn't sleep. As she tossed and turned, listening to the late summer crickets and wishing the night air would cool down, her ears picked up that same growling rumble for the third time. Exasperated, Nelly made up her mind to go catch the horse — storm or no storm — so she wouldn't have to worry about it for the rest of the night. Walking out the front door and down the porch steps with a determined pace, Nelly was immediately startled by the noise she had been hearing — only this time it was much louder, and she knew instantly that it wasn't thunder at all: It was a growl.

A human-like figure streaked out of the shadows and stood directly in front of her, arms raised and roaring with a terrifying guttural howl. In the second that it stood still, towering above her head, Nelly's eyes absorbed the creature's appearance. It was completely covered in dark fur with yellow streaks that looked like lightning, as if the approaching thunderstorm she thought she had heard had become incarnate with all its fury concentrated directly in front of her. The creature's eyes caught the moonlight and shined so vividly that they seemed to be illuminated from within.

Being somewhat hemmed-in between the monster and the house, Nelly had no choice but to wheel around and try to reach the front door. As she stepped on the lower porch step, she felt the creature's furry arms slide around her waist. Grabbing a porch post and jerking herself closer to the house, Nelly slipped from its grip momentarily, but it regained its hold around her ankles. A massive struggle ensued as Nelly pulled and writhed while the creature tried to pry her loose from the porch. The whole house seemed to tremble, and Nelly feared that the post she clutched would break loose and the monster would carry her off, post and all.

Awakened by the commotion out front, Nelly's husband came running toward the door. The sight of another person apparently scared the creature, as it immediately released its grip on Nelly and ran away. Nelly stumbled to the front door and fell over in a faint just as Carl arrived at the porch.

The monster left their farm, but reports in the following days seemed to indicate that it was on some sort of rampage. Several neighbors reported sightings of it. In Buffalo Cove, on the other side of the ridge, a young boy crossing a creek on a fallen log was injured after the creature knocked him violently to the ground.

### Mystery remains

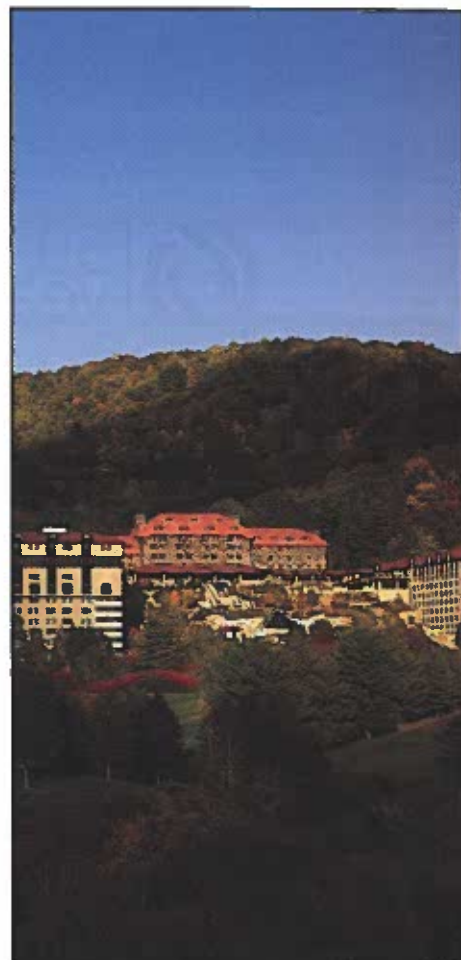
This single event, with the accompanying sightings elsewhere, is apparently the only known incident involving the creature, as Thunder Hill never gained a reputation as a monster habitat in the following years. The creature seemed to dissipate as quickly as a dying summer thunderstorm.

A few miles away in a community near Boone, however, a legend exists of a mysterious creature that seems to appear only near horses. It was seen quite frequently when horses were used for transportation, startling horseback riders and wagon passengers at a specific location. The legend extends back well into the 1800s. No one seems to agree on the shape and form of the monster, comparing it variously to different animals. It has dark fur, emerges only when the moon is full, and moves so swiftly that it seems to appear and disappear instantly.

The parallels with the Thunder Hill monster are evident, however, leading one to wonder if the incidents are related. Did the creature temporarily wander away from its home territory? Was it a rogue bear? A huge panther? Was it a bigfoot? Does it have offspring? Was it an apparition? Is it still there? Who knows?

Visitors enjoying the Thunder Hill scenery might be advised to stay alert. The rumble of an approaching thunderstorm could foreshadow something other than bad weather. 🐾

*R. Kelly Coffey lives in Blowing Rock.*



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