

Brush with History

Crestwood artist Luce captures Patriot march on canvas

He traveled where Revolutionary War
soldiers fought and died in key battle

By Helen E. McKinney
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(May 2009) – To achieve a better understanding of history and the sacrifices made by men and women during the formulative years of the United States, artist Richard Luce has literally walked in the footsteps of these individuals. His dedication is part of an undertaking to create a series of paintings based on the 1780 Battle of King’s Mountain and the events leading up to it.

“To read a book is one thing,” said Luce, but to actually take part in a recreation of a historical moment is the impetus he sought for inspiration. “Walking over the same ground, spending as much time as they did,” made the trek worthwhile for the Crestwood, Ky., resident.

With every step they took, these militia men were going farther and farther from home, Luce said. Accomplishing the same feat made him realize the dedication of the Overmountain, or Backwater, Men.

Of Scotch-Irish descent, these men had settled West, or “over” the Appalachian Mountains in what is now Western Virginia and Eastern Tennessee. Thus they earned the name, Overmountain Men. Their two-week campaign across the Appalachian Mountains in 1780 in pursuit of British Maj. Patrick Ferguson ended at the Battle of King’s Mountain.



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At 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 7, 1780, these men, roughly numbering 900 Patriots (including John Crockett, father of Davy Crockett) faced 1,000 Tories on King's Mountain, S.C. King's Mountain was a rocky forested hill in the upper Piedmont near the border between North Carolina and South Carolina. The men had traveled from Virginia for a 70-minute battle that most historians label one of the most influential in American history.

Theodore Roosevelt described the event in his book, "The Winning of the West," by writing "This brilliant victory marked the turning point of the American Revolution." Maj. Ferguson, the only British person on the battlefield, died that day. Gen. Charles Cornwallis, commander of all the British forces in the south, lost one-third of his army and retreated to South Carolina.

Since 1975, the Overmountain Victory Trail Association has conducted a re-enactment of the Overmountain Men's march to King's Mountain. Luce joined the march last year, which began Sept. 20 in Abingdon, Va., and ended Oct. 7 at King's Mountain National Military Park, S.C.

Originally from Yonkers, N.Y., Luce, 59, admits he did not know much about the battle before the trek. In August 2008, he visited Crockett's birthplace in Tennessee with good friend, Steve Ricker. There, they met members of the Overmountain Victory Trail Association who told them about the march that would take place the following month.

Luce was invited along by OVTA member Mike Dahl, who had previously seen his artwork. Dahl, who lives in Knoxville, Tenn., said he instinctively knew that Luce "was the man to tell the story of the Overmountain Men with a paint brush."

For Luce, half the fun was learning the history behind the battle and related events. The group camped at every campsite where the Overmountain Men were encamped.

"We walked 30 miles of the original trail beds," said Luce, who snapped photographs and took notes along the way. The national historic trail is 330 miles in length, but only 70 miles are open for public use, said Paul Carson, superintendent of the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail.

Only the Patriot route of the 1780 Kings Mountain campaign is identified and marked. The trail goes through Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina and South Carolina and the trail was created through congressional authorization. The National Park Service oversees the trail.



Photo provided by Richard Luce

Re-enactor and Crestwood, Ky., artist Richard Luce, who not only marched with the group but was commissioned to paint battle scenes.

The trail provides a physical connection to the past, said Carson. “The trail provides a real resource on the ground that people can visit and learn about the story. It’s one thing to read about it, another to stand there.”

From a military standpoint, many historians consider this battle a major turning point in the Revolutionary War, which lasted from 1775 to 1783, said Carson. The war took place in different phases, he said, beginning in New England and then moving to the middle states. After a series of failures, the British moved their strategy to the South.

By the end of 1780 they thought they would capture South Carolina, said Carson. But the British plan to reconquer the colonies failed. As a result, “it was an utter defeat for Ferguson,” Carson said.

The British retreated to South Carolina and did not do much for the next three to four months. This interlude allowed the Patriots to create a regular army (as opposed to a militia) in North Carolina. This army successfully resisted the British, and Gen. Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, with the Patriots winning the War for Independence.

The Battle of King’s Mountain changed what the war looked like up until this point, said Carson. “It stopped their (British) momentum.”

Many people are under the perception that the Revolutionary War took place up North, Carson said. They are not aware that actual fighting took place in the southern colonies as well.

“It’s exciting to have an artist focusing on the campaign,” he said. Carson pointed out that most artists have focused on the battle itself, with some exceptions. “Luce will present a fresh perspective on the campaign and the events that happened on it.”

To give his work realistic detail, Luce said that making the march at the same time of year, even having rain when the Overmountain Men experienced rain, gave him “a better appreciation for what people did back then.”

Along the way the re-enactors stopped at different schools explaining their mission. Luce said 6,700 students received a hands-on look at history, and “the kids were fascinated.”

Dahl said, “Richard looked at the trail, its history, those places along the trail where the ground speaks to you in a way that we never had. He gave us a new insight into the trail we have never seen before.”



Photos provided by Richard Luce

Re-enactors taking part in battle scenes and camps during the march through Virginia and Tennessee to retrace the events leading up to the 1780 Battle of King’s Mountain in South Carolina.



Randell Jones, historian, writer and past president of the association, said of the battle, “It’s a heroic tale and everybody loves a hero. The story intrigued me for the heroics exhibited by these mountain men and also because my ancestors lived in East Tennessee.”

Jones, who lives in Winston-Salem, N.C., has participated in some portion of the march since 1999. “People who follow the route of the Overmountain Men see the landscape and can more readily imagine the challenge faced by a party of 1,000 militiamen moving across the mountains and then down through North Carolina.”



He said the battle was significant for several reasons. “It was American fighting American. It was Loyalist vs. Patriot, a true civil war.”

The battle was the only battle in the American Revolution in which the rifle played a deciding role. The entire force of Overmountain Men were mounted and there was not a single Continental soldier or Continental officer involved.

Jones said the association does a great job telling this story. The experience of the march is different every year because “special things happen that are never repeated.” It is this uniqueness that Luce aspires to capture on canvas for others to experience visually.

Luce said history has been his lifelong passion. He remembers being engrossed in a book about World War II by age 10. So when he took up painting, he jumped into historical subject matter naturally.

“History is more than just names and dates,” said Dahl. “History is the story of people and the times they lived in.”

• To view “*The Backwater Men*,” the first painting in Luce’s series, visit: www.RichardLuce.com. For more information about the Battle of King’s Mountain visit: www.ovta.org or www.nps.gov.